

You're Not Alone by LadyFrاندrews

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Summary:

Mrs. Johnson assigns partners for a "Love Letter Project" in Steve's English class. Unknown to him, his partner ends up being one Billy Hargrove. Through the semester long assignment, the boys learn things about themselves and the other that they never would've otherwise. At the end of the semester, will their admissions throughout their letters change how they feel about each other? Or is their animosity too much?

1. Anchor

Author's Note:

I found "The Love Letter Project" writing prompt in a Google search. I totally dig it, and since I'm kind of stuck on this ship, here is yet another thing I'm attempting to do. Love Letter Project is a real thing and I am in no way, shape, or form attached to it. I just really liked the prompt and am using it. If it crosses any lines, I'll definitely stop and close up shop. In other words: I OWN NOTHING.

In this first chapter, the italics in the teacher's words are from the actual prompt (if I knew how to embed images I'd do it but I'm not that savvy).

Steve's letters will be in bold.
Billy's will be bold & italics.

I am going with Steve being dyslexic, which is why words will be deliberately messed up in his letters (mostly I'm swapping a lot of d's for b's). Things should still be easily read and understood though.

“Alright class, we’re going to do something throughout the semester, yes, groan all you want, it’s still not changing the fact that this is for a *grade*, so pay attention. There’s an even number of you, so I’ve got twelve symbols that match to another in this hat. The point of this is to remain anonymous from your partner until the very end of the semester.

“I want you to *consider the greatest challenge you’ve overcome in life and write a love letter* to your classmate. *I’m asking you to write a love letter because your personal story will make a powerful difference in the lives of others.* What I really want you to get out of this is, *write a love letter about a challenge you faced, and you will touch hearts, lift spirits, and*

show the world that no one is alone.

“I’ll have you come up by rows, you will pick your symbol out of the hat and I’ll mark down your name on a master list—only I will know who your partner is. Now, we’ll start off pretty simple for our first letter though, we won’t dive into the deep end just yet. I want you to write about your favorite class. Why is it your favorite? What do you get out of it? Alright, Mr. Hargrove, if you’d start us off.”

Steve glanced up from where he was doodling in his notebook, he’d forgotten that Billy Hargrove was in this class—he was taking a senior English course despite only being a junior. He watched as Billy sauntered up to the front and reached in the hat and pulled out a paper, unfolded it and showed it to the teacher.

Steve was in the far right row. Not quite the last student, he had two more behind him, but it was going to be a while. He thought about his greatest challenge—he thought he’d get away with writing about his absent parents, but *everyone* knew his parents were never around and whoever he ended up with would immediately know it was him.

When it was finally his turn to go up after Jenny Wilson, he saw the three pieces of paper left in the hat. He went with the one in the middle—he opened it up, it was an anchor. He saw Mrs. Johnson write on her clipboard and returned to his seat.

He knew he could write about his near death experience. He’d just have to find a way to omit certain details about the Upside Down, but he could write about how he’s been feeling. How he doesn’t sleep unless he’s knocked unconscious via too much brandy—he really should stock up before his parents come home. His dad might actually notice this time around.

“Wonderful, everyone’s been paired up. I want your homework this evening to be your first letter. Remember, your favorite class. Sign the letters with your assigned symbol that way I know who to deliver them to. I’ll have a box for you to drop them into. I’ll give you the last ten minutes of class to begin.”

Steve heard grumbling from around the classroom, but everyone was shuffling around to pull out a sheet of paper. He’d wondered if he’d

be able to recognize the handwriting. They never really read each other's works in this class, but he's been around majority of them to kind of guess who has what handwriting. The girls were all loopy, big, and some of them dotted their I's with hearts or small circles. Some of the guys wrote in all caps, and some just had horrible chicken scratch. A few actually write in cursive, which made reading that much harder for Steve.

It wasn't that he *couldn't* read, it's just sometimes letters got turned around and mixed up in his brain. That could be something else he could write about to his partner, or pen pal, maybe? That sounded better than *partner*.

He stared down at the blank sheet of paper.

Hi, I think this is a stupid assignment but I guess it is kind of neat that you won't know who I am. Can't use this information against me. At least not until the end of the semester. Shit.

My favorite class, I'm not sure I have one. School isn't really easy for me, I struggle a lot more than I am willing to confess. I'll apologise now if some of my words don't make sense, or seem a little mixed up letters wise. I think the word is dyslexic but I don't even think that's how it's spelled. It's a funny looking word.

If I have to pick a favorite class, I'd say I like gym, but not because I'm stupid or anything. I like running, it helps me clear my mind. Just my feet pounding on the pavement and nothing else to focus on, it's nice to just have an empty mind for just a little bit each day.

The bell rang signaling the end of class. Steve packed his things away as did the rest of his classmates.

He headed to lunch; he didn't *really* want to sit with Nancy and Jonathan, but since he really didn't have any other friends, and he didn't want to sit by himself, he managed.

Nancy always asked about his well-being like she still has an opinion on his well-being. He hated her a little bit more each day because of

it. Neither of them have Mrs. Johnson because Nancy and Jonathan both take A.P. courses, because *of course* they do.

He isn't really hungry and he tells them he's going to the library, and without waiting for them to say anything he gets up and walks away from probably the only two people in the entire school that actually give a damn about it. Well, the only person; he's pretty sure Jonathan just tolerates him for Nancy's sake.

He wanders through the hallways slowly, making his way to the library. He can't really recall a time when he actively chose to come to the library, but he knows he's been here a few times when he and Nancy were dating. He'd managed to distract her a few times with making out in a corner somewhere.

He knows there are tables somewhere that he can put his stuff down and probably get a head start on homework. He knows he needs all the time he can spare. He's promised Dustin and Lucas rides to the arcade after school today.

With a sigh he slumps into a chair and pulls out his math homework. It's still hard, but definitely easier than the reading for history, and the letter for english. By the time the bell rings signaling the end of his lunch period, he's finished half of his math homework already.

He notices, on his way out, that Billy Hargrove is talking with the librarian, Mr. Watkins, and they seem to be in a pleasant conversation—he didn't know Billy could be pleasant.

He stops by his locker and drops off his backpack and heads to gym. He has an hour of running ahead of him, and like he wrote in his first letter, it's his favorite class because he gets to forget.

He gets to forget that monsters are real. They exist and they killed people he knows. *Knew*.

He gets to forget that Nancy Wheeler called their love bullshit. That the first girl he really, truly loved, thinks he's bullshit.

He gets to forget that he's not exhausted because he has nightmares—Dustin survived. Lucas survived. Max survived. Even Mike Wheeler

survived. That kid's an asshole. *He* survived.

He gets to forget that Billy Hargrove nearly killed him that night too. He's lucky he didn't need stitches, or that he actually *woke up* the next morning.

He gets to forget that his parents would rather travel all over the country, sometimes the world, than be at home with him. He was ten when he realized that they were *buying* his love.

He enters the gym and goes to his assigned locker to change out of his school clothes into his gym shorts and tee. He swaps out his sneakers for his running shoes—grateful that he can have more than one pair of shoes for school and gym. Actual running shoes make a difference.

Coach doesn't mind if Steve doesn't participate in whatever game he has for the period if he's running on the track. He's all about participation no matter its form. Some days Steve plays with his classmates, but he usually just runs. Or at least he's been running since Halloween; since after the disaster that was Tina's party.

He nods to Coach for attendance and then heads outside for the track. Some days he's the only one running, others, like today, there's a few others running instead of playing volleyball.

Later, in the showers, he tries hard not to panic—he can feel his chest tightening and his heart racing. He knows he shouldn't be feeling like this, it's stupid to feel anxious over something that's done and over with. They won. Eleven shut the gate for fucks sake. He stands under the water stream longer than necessary, but he didn't need his classmates to know a few tears had fallen. If his eyes were still red afterwards, he could just say he got soap or shampoo in them.

Sometimes he hates that as boys they're taught from a young age that showing emotions, especially the *negative* ones, is a sign of weakness that will be used against you. Emotions were felt by *everyone*; girls didn't always get shit on for feeling sad, or crying. Or crying when they were just so mad, because sometimes when you're angry, tears are what come out because that's just the level your emotions are on.

He had one more period before he had to go wait for The Party to get out of school. It wasn't that history wasn't an interesting class, he just hated that it was his last class of the day. He went from the mind-numbing high of a great run, to sitting through Mr. Thompson's droning, monotone voice. Most days he fell asleep.

As he sat in his car in front of the middle school he pulled out his notebook from english and stared down at his letter. How long did it have to be? He'd said everything Mrs. Johnson asked for, hadn't he?

You can tell me if you think this is stupid to. Anb again, I'm really sorry if my spelling mistakes bother you. I just ask that once this assignment is over, you keep this piece of me to yourself. Please?

I just, I get enough shit from people as it is, I really bon't neeb this one more thing to get out.

It was as finished as it was going to be. He hoped Mrs. Johnson accepted it. She always gave him great pointers for his papers. The first teacher to actually work *with* him instead of making him feel stupid for not being able to write a proper paper, and definitely not as degrading as Nancy Wheeler reading over his college application essays.

He heard the familiar rumble of that blue camaro—it must be getting close for the kids to get out. Billy Hargrove never showed up any earlier than needed to pick up Max. They were always the first ones to leave the parking lot but she was always the last one to join them at the arcade.

He watched as The Party walked out of the school and towards the parking lot, he waved at them, like the fond idiot he was.

Once close enough he could hear Dustin, "Hey buddy, you think you could also give Will a ride? He already called his mom and she said it was fine."

He nodded at the trio of faces peering in through his passenger window; "Get in nerds."

Squealing tires let him know Max made it to Billy's car and they were off.

"Can you also give Mike a ride? We don't see Nancy's car anywhere."

All the boys looked around the parking lot and notice the Wheeler's family car was missing.

"Yeah, sure, get in Wheeler."

Once the four boys were situated he made sure to remind them, "Seatbelts or we're not moving!" He started up the car as heard the four clicks of belts being fastened. They were on their way through Hawkins to the arcade. He'd just work on homework in his car while they played. It was better than sitting in his big, empty house—*alone*.

2. If I'm Being Completely Honest

Steve glanced at his alarm clock—3:15am.

It was the same nightmare he had every night—or rather often enough it felt like it was the one recurring thing if he actually got any sleep—without the aid of his dad's liquor. If he passed out with liquid assistance he couldn't remember if he dreamed of anything or not.

Billy had actually killed him, which then in turn caused the death of all of The Party, except Will. It was like Steve witnessed everything outside of his body. He stood over Billy's shoulder as he pounded Steve's face—the drugs Max injected didn't do a damn thing. Or at least not fast enough.

The kids had decided to leave Steve behind. He watched as they arrived to the farm where they knew Hop had dug a hole. He watched them climb down and make it to their destination. He knew they'd make it to the center and light the place on fire, but what was always the moment of change is when they heard the demodogs coming towards them.

They'd always misjudge how much time they had to climb up the rope. Max was torn in half, the boys sending her first as some sort of act of chivalry. Instead making her an easy target to latch onto as they were attacked from both sides of the tunnel; Lucas was always next—he always died trying to get to Max.

Mike and Dustin would always run. Mike fell and told Dustin to keep going—Dustin would half the time. The times he wouldn't, he and Mike were attacked. It was like watching multiple versions of the time they'd seen Bob killed—it played over and over in Steve's mind in slow-motion. The faces opening up and biting the boys, tearing them apart between the numbers of flower-petal shaped mouths. The times Dustin would keep running, it was always D'art who killed him. That's when he'd always wake up—the moment Dustin died.

It was like his subconscious loved tormenting himself. He knew he wasn't going to get back to sleep, not when he had to be up in a few hours for school. He could go for a run, but the sun hadn't risen yet.

It wasn't that he was afraid of the dark, he just knew what lurked in the shadows now. Logically Steve knew that El had shut the gate—there was nothing out there anymore.

He got up and headed downstairs for his first of many cups of coffee for the day. He could finish up his history homework.

He also thought about how he would be able to put into words how he was feeling with almost dying. How do you tell a not-stranger that you almost died saving them? How do you *not* tell them that there are things that go bump in the night that would make probably even Billy Hargrove shit his pants?

How do you tell someone that sometimes you aren't sure if you care that you almost didn't make it? Steve knew he was struggling with the aftermath of the Upside Down—he's not stupid. He knows it was pretty fucked up that some monster had the ability to possess Will Byers, and had an army of demodogs at its beck and call.

He also knows that it's pretty fucked up that he almost died at the *bare hands* of a kid in his class—nope, Billy's in the year *below* him. How *messed up* do you have to be as a *human being* to be able to get *that* angry? He smashed one of Joyce's plates over his head because he defended Lucas. Billy Hargrove was loud, obnoxious, and an asshole. He wasn't worth another thought in Steve's mind.

When the clock on the kitchen wall read 7:15 Steve headed over to school. He knew he was early, there were only six other cars there—pretty sure that none of the teacher's were there yet. If they were, he never noticed if they had a separate parking lot.

He headed in and went to his homeroom and sat down at his assigned desk. He closed his eyes for only a moment—when he jerked awake with a yell on his lips he heard snickering all around him.

“Nice of you to finally join us, Mr. Harrington,” said Mr. Roberts, his homeroom teacher. He didn't bother looking around at his classmates, knowing this was just one more thing that would be spread around the school before lunch time—Steve Harrington cries in his sleep, or something equally humiliating and stupid.

Fuck Nancy Wheeler. She really fucked up Steve's reputation, but he knew that he didn't care about that anymore. It's probably the one good thing that came from their relationship. He just wished that he had a real friend, someone who actually gave a damn about him. Tommy H was once his best friend, but once he and Carol started dating in middle school his ability to actually be that best friend petered off rather quickly. One of those things where people grow up and not together Steve guessed.

By the time english came around again he was a little nervous. They were getting their first letters today. He knew that what he wrote in his own might come back to haunt him one day, but what's done is done. He'd dropped it in the box the moment he walked into class.

He watched instead of listening to the cassette playing *The Tell-Tale Heart*, as Mrs. Johnson glanced through the letters in the box and put them in piles of what he assumed were the matching symbols. In that pile was his letter and the one he'd be getting.

Was it lame that he wanted to skip lunch and go to the library and read his letter? Steve was a little embarrassed about how into this he just got—for some reason seeing the letters in person amped up an excitement about this he didn't realize he possessed previously.

He realized that as Mrs. Johnson was handing out letters, she had drawn a symbol and a number one or two beside it.

"For the sake of keeping things anonymous, I'm asking that you don't open these until you're out of the classroom. We don't need it spoiled too soon who our partners are. That would defeat the purpose of this project. I do want to say that I appreciate all the honesty I've seen about your favorite subjects, and how most of you think this assignment is stupid. I also appreciate all of you participating.

"I know I'd be thinking the same thing had this happened when I was your ages. It's Wednesday, so let's make our second letter due Friday. We're delving a little deep with this next letter, which is why I'm giving you two nights to work on it—write about an apology you never accepted. Why didn't you? Write about how you felt hearing those words you don't believe. Do they still bother you? If so, or not, why; I want you all to think a bit before you go writing things down

this time.”

When Mrs. Johnson finally made it around to Steve and handed him his letter he knew he sounded stupid when he said it felt a little weighty in his hand. He tucked it into his notebook and stuffed that into his backpack. He was definitely going to the library again.

“I also want you all to finish the last bit of *The Tell-Tale Heart* this evening. We’re going to complete a questionnaire tomorrow.”

Steve didn’t articulate it, but he felt the groans heard around the classroom. He’d have to see if he could borrow the cassette from Mrs. Johnson, or ask Mr. Watkins if the library had one he could take home.

When the bell rang he didn’t even hesitate in heading towards the library instead of to the cafeteria. Nancy would probably try and hunt him down later, but he’d manage. He also knew that her apology was the one thing he’d be writing about later too—it might still bother him, more than he’s willing to admit, but he knows he’s trying to let it go.

He followed the same path he took yesterday to find the tables and settled in at the same one he sat at yesterday. He pulled his notebook out of his bag and glanced around to see if anyone from his class was around.

He unfolded the sheet of notebook paper and immediately noticed how neat the handwriting was. It was all capital letters, which helped when it came to reading, but he knew from looking at it, his partner was a boy. None of the girls could write this blocky.

My favorite class is a topic that I don’t particularly like sharing with other people. Not because I’m worried about what they’ll think, but because, and I’m going to sound very arrogant for a moment (I’m not sorry), I tend to be one of, if not the smartest person in the room. However, I like English; Literature to be more specific. I like to read. A lot actually; I want a library of my own one day, as in a room in my house devoted to nothing but my collection of books.

Some of the books from this class so far: Animal Farm—I hate that

fucking pig. I don't think I've ever hated a fictional character this much in my entire life. The Great Gatsby—I got a few pages from the end, found out everything was a lie, and I swore that book sat unfinished on my nightstand for a week. I was so mad!!! I will never understand why people shit on Shakespeare; he really isn't that hard to understand. Dude's got dick jokes for days. One of my favorites, and it might be a little cliché once you find out who I am, is The Outsiders. It got me in ways I'm not ready to talk about. I don't know if I ever will.

I feel like I could say anything in these letters because if I'm being completely honest, nobody here really knows me. Or nobody tries to get to know me. I'm okay with that though. I don't mind being alone. Sometimes it's better for everyone if I am.

Don't go thinking I'm a giant nerd though; I do like some of that dorky shit. Star Wars is pretty awesome. I do partake of the arcade, but only when the mood strikes me. I like board games though. Bet once you find out who I am, that will blow your mind.

Steve couldn't help but feel a little inadequate at the letter in his hands. He was paired up with a smart kid—they were going to think he was a fucking idiot and probably request to Mrs. Johnson that they need a new partner. One whose handwriting they could actually read.

Maybe this project wasn't going to be the greatest idea after all. Though his partner did have a sense of humor—did Shakespeare really have a lot of dick jokes?

He folded the letter back up and glanced around again—only three more students had entered the library and he didn't really know any of them. Not that he'd be all that talkative in the first place.

He couldn't relate to the comments about the books they read for class so far this year. He remembers a few of his classmates getting into heated discussions during *Animal Farm* at the end, when it came to talking about the pigs. He will never tell his partner that he didn't realize that *The Great Gatsby* was a lie—had he missed something? He didn't even realize it was supposed to be a love story—or that's what some of his classmates had discussed. He didn't really like either of

those stories if he was being honest.

As for *The Outsiders*, Steve actually *liked* that one. He followed the plot easily, and it was easy enough read that he kept up quite well with the rest of his classmates. He's not sure if he *wants* to understand what part of it his partner relates to the most—it's not a cheerful story per se, so he knows relating to any of those guys isn't necessarily a *good* thing. No, it depends on what you relate to.

Steve's interest is active again—his partner got him thinking—about school work. That hasn't happened to him in a long time.

He had two days to figure out how to write about Nancy Wheeler's bullshit apology without making it obvious that's who he's talking about because again, his partner would immediately know it was him. Why did so much of his life have to be the topic of gossip? Curse of a small town, maybe.

3. We're At A Stalemate

I knew the moment Mrs. Johnson asked us to write about an apology we didn't accept, I was going to write about my ex. I never accepted their apology. In fact it still makes me so mad thinking about it.

I know that we're young. We're teenagers and we shouldn't be able to know what love is, but we do. But how is it fair for me to not be mad at them when they were emotionally checked out of our relationship long before it ended? I guess I could blame myself for letting it go for so long, but if they were long gone before it ended, shouldn't they have said something a lot sooner?

Also, how do you just have the guts to know you're the smartest person in the room? Or one of them?

I felt a little stupid because I honestly had no idea that Shakespeare is full of sick jokes. I did think Romeo and Juliet was a little much. It might be a biased opinion though because I'm still bitter about my ex. I am not bullshit.

I've learned a long time ago not to care what others think about me, but that, the one person who I loved telling me that our love was all a lie, am I wrong for still being mad about it?

They moved on too! All happy and content.

And here I am all bitter and angry.

I liked The Outsiders too. It was one of the easier books to follow and read along with.

I think I saw Star Wars. One of the kids I babysit is into all that geeky shit.

This bothers me more than I want to say, so I'm going to end here.

Steve knew it wasn't his best, but he tried. He rushed it this morning sitting in his car in the parking lot.

His parents came home Wednesday night after school. They had to do their usual pretend to be functional family which meant one public outing together, and of course the stilted dinner around their dining room table.

He'd long since gotten used to being left to his own devices—he knew the difference between being lonely and being alone. His mother doted as is her usual routine upon their return from one of their many trips.

She always gave him whatever gifts she accumulated for him—buying his time and his love.

They haven't been home in three months. He's had a lot going on and he didn't even know how to begin to talk to them about how he was feeling, let alone to his dad about his future plans.

He had no idea what he wanted to do, but he did know that he didn't want to go and work for him. No offense to his dad, but all the money in the world could make Steve want to create this same kind of life for any partner or children he had in the future. An absent father that still felt he had a say in how things were going to go, and a partner who bought their children items to make them feel or think they were loved—no thanks.

Instead of going to homeroom and first period he went to the library.

He probably could rewrite his letter but he didn't have enough time now. He noticed he wasn't the only student hiding out and working on last minute assignments—two girls from his math class were working together two tables away. Three guys from the basketball team were all pretending to study, but were really sleeping, their heads on their backpacks like a make-shift pillow.

He definitely needed to go for a run today—he needed to get his head back on.

He made it through his science class and then he was entering Mrs. Johnson's room and handing in his letter.

His reply was already waiting for him. He glanced around and

noticed that he was one of the last three students to arrive, and the only boy of the group. He couldn't even decipher from that who his partner was.

Did he really want to know though? This early on? Probably not, but if he figured it out on his own he wouldn't let them know.

He watched as Mrs. Johnson finished prepping the letters, sliding them into the outer envelope to remain unknown, then handed out the next group.

He hoped this smartest person in the room didn't mock his spelling mistakes. He knew he couldn't help but to look stupid on paper—he'd heard enough about it from Nancy and his dad. He really didn't need one more person to add to the mockery. He had feelings and they were slowly being chipped away by being constantly, not outright told, but told that he's stupid.

They were starting one more story by Edgar Allen Poe, *The Cask of Amontillado*. He'd kind of enjoyed *The Tell-Tale Heart*, it was definitely an interesting take on feeling guilty. He knew he could relate to that overbearing sound of your own heartbeat, but his relation came from being terrified by the monsters from the Upside Down. This story though, he didn't know anything about it; he'd have to see if there was an extra audio tape in the library.

Mrs. Johnson had them read-aloud as a class. Steve hated read-aloud days. He hated the sniggers as he, and two other students in his class struggled with some of the words. He hated the bored sighs even more.

When the bell rang, signaling the end of class, Mrs. Johnson asked Steve to stay back a moment. He hated those sniggers too.

He sat and watched everyone else file out of the classroom.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm very impressed with your work so far on these letters. You're being very honest and it shows. Your partner has a suggestion, one I think if you start implementing in future letters, will be beneficial for you in the long run. How are you feeling so far about this project?"

Steve shrugged, “I think it’s kind of neat to learn these things about someone I know, but don’t really know. My partner told me that they’re very smart, like the smartest person in the room smart, but even with that bit of information I’m having a hard time figuring out who it could be.”

She smiled, “It’s too early to tell anyways, but they’re right, they’re one of my most intelligent students. Very into literature, which I know they shared with you. I made sure to ask Mr. Watkins for an extra cassette of *Amontillado* for you, so here’s that. I’m glad you enjoyed Poe, you strike me as someone who’s not really fond of the darker side of life, but you have a knack for understanding it. Better than most of your peers even. I won’t keep you any longer, do you need a pass?”

He shook his head no, “I was headed to library for lunch anyway, but I might go the gym early. Get a head start on running. Might listen to the story on my walkman, uh, thanks a lot Mrs. Johnson; I really do appreciate what you do for me.”

She smiled, “You’re not unintelligent Steve Harrington, stop letting people influence your belief on that.”

Steve waved and left her classroom. He noticed a few students sitting down in front of lockers having lunch together—maybe he should see if Jonathan and Nancy would like to do that, enjoy some time away from prying eyes in the cafeteria. Or not, that might just spread more rumors about the three of them being an item.

He made the familiar trek to what he’s now deemed his table in the back of the library. His mind stuck on the comment Mrs. Johnson made about his partner—*Your partner has a suggestion, one I think if you start implementing in future letters, will be beneficial for you in the long run.* He wanted nothing more than to rip open the envelope and read the words written for him.

He glanced around, noting he was the only one in the library. He saw Mr. Watkins with the book cart, shelving books on the far side.

He took a deep breath and pulled out the letter.

Everyone has something they want to keep for themselves, I can respect that. I have a few things that I like to keep for myself, so yes, after all of this, I will keep your secret.

If I'm being honest, which I am, I'm very hit and miss with this assignment. I think in some aspects it's kind of amazing to open up to someone we see on a daily basis but know nothing more about than the surface glimpses we get into their lives. I'm excited about it too. I did have the passing thought, a few times, that this is stupid. Why the hell would I tell someone I could care less about my deepest secrets? We'll see how this goes.

I want to offer a suggestion, and if it's something you've done before and it didn't stick, I do apologize. I'm sorry. I don't want to step on your toes. Do you read better with all capital letters? Do you write better using all capitals too? I can start using all capital letters if that makes this easier for you. I'LL DO IT ANYWAYS. I had have friends who are dyslexic, and for two of them it helps using and reading all capital letters. Just a thought, and if I overstepped, please don't hesitate to tell me.

An apology I never accepted—Mrs. Johnson really knows where to hit us doesn't she? Someone I know found out one of my secrets, something that I kept close to my chest. They told someone else about it and stuff happened. Life altering stuff happened. I hated them for the longest time. I think I still do, but I also understand where they were coming from. Doesn't make it any easier though; I questioned a lot of myself, about who I am as a person and what I stand for. I also let them know they weren't forgiven for what they did. They understand though. We're at a stalemate. We have to see each other on a daily basis so we're trying to work around it, but it's hard. I don't make it easy for them either. They don't deserve the easy route, not with the aftermath they caused. Apparently I'm still bitter, but it is kind of a fresh wound, so I think I'm allowed to be.

You like to run? I can get behind it, but if I don't have to I'm not going to go out of my way to do it. I get it though, the want for that mind-numbing state of being. That blank slate where for however long it lasts, you don't have to worry or think about anything. I get that when I get lost in a book. I can get lost in another world, another time, with different people, and learn so much more. Okay,

maybe I really am a giant nerd, but can you respect that and not tell the whole world when this is all said and done? I'd appreciate it.

Also, if you're up for it, want to tack on our own questions at the end? I'll answer the question I'm going to ask you. For example: Where in the world do you hope most to visit? Me, I'd love to visit the Mediterranean, Italy and Greece mostly. Mostly for the food, but one of my mom's closest friends is from Greece and always talked about their homeland. And the food their mom made, I'd chop my hand off if I could have free access to that stuff all the time. It was always so good! Would I be devastated if I never make it? Probably not, but it's on my bucket list.

Steve stared down at the paper in front of him and had the distinct thought of—well shit. He rushed his second letter and here is this well thought out and well spoken response. And all he gave his partner was five minutes of rushed writing in his car this morning. He felt like an asshole.

He'd never thought about using only capital letters before. He'd give it a try though. It was definitely a nice suggestion.

He quickly scrambled for a sheet of paper.

I FEEL LIKE A COMPLETE ASSHOLE FOR MY SHITTY LETTER. I READ THROUGH YOURS AND WAS BLOWN AWAY. YOU WEREN'T KIDDING WHEN YOU SAID YOU WERE SMART. I FEEL SO STUPID.

THANK YOU FOR THE SUGGESTION THOUGH. I'VE NEVER REALLY THOUGHT ABOUT GIVING IT A TRY BEFORE.

SO WE'RE BOTH STILL NOT OVER THE APOLOGIES WE NEVER ACCEPTED. I CAN UNDERSTAND WHERE YOU'RE COMING FROM. I THINK. SUBJECTS WE'RE NOT WILLING TO TALK ABOUT YET.

ITALY IS BEAUTIFUL AND THE FOOD IS TO DIE FOR. MY MOM'S FAMILY IS FROM THERE SO I'M FAMILIAR WITH IT.

Steve suddenly dropped his pencil—what was he doing? Mrs.

Johnson didn't say they couldn't just respond, so maybe he should just finish his letter. Plus, would they know that about his mom?

He ripped the page from his notebook and folded it up and put it in his back pocket. He'd try again at home.

He just really needed to clear his head. He packed his stuff up and headed to gym.

Unknown to him, his paper didn't make it into his back pocket, it had fallen to the floor underneath his chair.

4. Vulnerable or Invincible

Steve ran a hand through his hair, yet again. He glanced at the clock on his nightstand, it read 2:32am.

He hadn't even *tried* to go to bed.

His room was torn to pieces. He was looking for his letter from earlier; the one he'd started in the library.

It wasn't in his pocket where he'd put it.

He knew that logically, nobody would know it was his, nor would they know what he was talking about, let alone to whom the letter was meant for.

He knew that he was irrationally freaking out because it gave his anxiety something to latch on to and run rampant with.

He stopped and stood in the middle of his room, glanced around at the mess and took a deep breath.

Then another.

And another.

Then one more just to be sure.

Okay. So he may have dropped the letter, he didn't actually check to see if it made into his pocket. It had *felt* like it did.

He was glad it was early Saturday morning, so if he wanted to get some sleep, he could. He didn't have to worry about getting to school on time, or getting Dustin or any of the other kids somewhere on time.

He walked to his desk and grabbed one of his notebooks and sat down on his bed.

He'd just start over, and his partner would be none the wiser.

I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUGGESTION. I CAN'T SAY I'VE EVER TRIED IT BEFORE, OR IF ANYONE HAS EVER BROUGHT IT TO MY ATTENTION EITHER. THANKS.

I ALSO WANTED TO SAY THAT I FEEL LIKE SUCH AN ASSHOLE FOR GIVING YOU SUCH A SHITTY SECOND LETTER AND YOU WROTE ME THAT MASTERPIECE. COMPARED TO MY WRITING ANYWAY.

I SPENT LIKE TEN MINUTES WRITING THAT IN MY CAR (SORRY TO YOU AND TO MRS. JOHNSON!!!). YOU DESERVE BETTER, ESPECIALLY AFTER YOUR SUGGESTION. YOU WEREN'T A DICK ABOUT IT IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WERE WORRIED ABOUT.

I HEARD SOMEWHERE THAT WHEN YOU WITHHOLD FORGIVENESS YOU'RE REALLY ONLY HURTING YOURSELF. SOME DAYS THAT MAKES SENSE TO ME AND OTHERS I'M NOT ABOUT TO ALLOW SOMEONE WHO HAS NEVER HAD THEIR HEART BROKEN IN THE MANNER MINE WAS TELL ME HOW I SHOULD FEEL. ESPECIALLY ABOUT THE PERSON WHO BROKE MY HEART.

SORRY IF I OVERSTEP HERE, BUT IT SOUNDS LIKE THE PERSON YOU'RE AT A STALEMATE WITH IS A FAMILY MEMBER. I SAY THAT BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO SEE THEM ON A DAILY BASIS, AND I CAN'T IMAGINE KNOWING ANYONE, EVEN GROWING UP IN HAWKINS WITH EVERYONE, THAT WOULD BE SEEN ENOUGH TO CAUSE LIFE ALTERING AFTERMATHS. I'M AN ONLY CHILD SO I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO HAVE A SIBLING. I HAVE A LOT OF COUSINS, BUT OF THE TWELVE OF US, ONLY THREE OF US ARE THE SAME AGE, OR SIMILAR ENOUGH IN AGE.

I THINK I KNOW WHAT MRS. JOHNSON WANTS US TO DO WITH THIS ASSIGNMENT AND I HAVE TO BE HONEST WITH YOU, I FEEL LIKE I COULD FINISH IT RIGHT NOW. OR AT LEAST OVER THE WEEKEND.

MY TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE THAT SHE WANTS US TO WRITE ABOUT OVERCOMING, I'M STILL WORKING ON OVERCOMING IT. I'M FAIRLY CERTAIN THAT I NOW HAVE ANXIETY OR SOMETHING RESIDUAL FROM THE EVENTS.

I'LL SPARE YOU (BOTH) THE DETAILS JUST YET, BUT I GET IT NOW.

I GET THE VULNERABILITY AND INVINCIBILITY OF BEING TOTALLY HONEST AND OPEN WITH A COMPLETE STRANGER. BECAUSE AT THE END OF THE DAY, THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE TO ME. A STRANGER WHO IS GETTING TO KNOW PARTS OF ME I DON'T THINK I EVEN SHARED WITH MY EX.

I THINK IT'S COOL THAT YOU WANT TO TRAVEL TO THE MEDITERRANEAN ONE DAY, AND I HOPE YOU DO. IT'S BEAUTIFUL THERE. AND THE FOOD IS TO DIE FOR. IF YOU MAKE IT TO GREECE, MAKE SURE YOU WEAR SHOES ON THE BEACH, URCHINS HURT LIKE A BITCH IF YOU STEP ON THEM. MY DAD NEVER LEARNS AND WE'VE BEEN GOING THERE SINCE I WAS YOUNG. WE HAVE FAMILY OVER THERE, WELL MOSTLY IN ITALY BUT WE ALL GATHER IN GREECE AS A HUGE EXTENDED FAMILY VACATION. IT ALWAYS MAKES MY EYES BLEED FROM BOREDOM.

ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD I'D WANT TO VISIT? AT NEARLY 2:30 IN THE MORNING, I'M HAVING A HARD TIME COMING UP WITH JUST ONE PLACE. I'D LOVE TO VISIT LONDON, AND NOT JUST BE STUCK IN THE AIRPORT. LIKE ACTUALLY RIDE ONE OF THOSE RIDICULOUS DOUBLE-DECKER BUSES. I WANT TO SEE THE GREAT BARRIER REEF IN PERSON. I THINK YOU CAN GO SNORKELING. THAT'D BE PRETTY COOL I THINK. I'M SUCH A FUCKING NERD. I'D ACTUALLY LIKE TO SEE CALIFORNIA. MY NANNY (WHEN I WAS YOUNGER), SHE'S FROM THERE. TOLD ME ALL ABOUT THE LITTLE AREA IN L.A. THAT SHE LIVED IN. HOW HER KIDS USED TO SKATEBOARD TO SCHOOL AND AROUND TOWN. HOW HER ELDEST SON WAS A TYPICAL SURFER, LONG WAVY HAIR, SUN BLEACHED, AND TAN SKIN. SHE SAID HE'D TEACH ME IF I EVER MADE IT OUT THERE. I GUESS IF I DID HAVE A BUCKET LIST, THAT'S ONE THING ON IT.

I'M SORRY, I WAS GOING SOMEWHERE WITH THAT LINE ABOUT WITHHOLDING FORGIVENESS. I DO THAT SOMETIMES, MY THOUGHTS GET ALL SCRAMBLED WHEN I'M WRITING DOWN AND I JUST TEND TO WRITE DOWN IN THE ORDER THINGS COME ACROSS MY MIND. I'VE BEEN GETTING BETTER

AT OUTLINING BEFORE I DO SOMETHING, BUT AGAIN, IT'S NOW ALMOST 3AM AND HERE I AM, WRITING TO YOU BECAUSE I HAVE NOTHING BETTER TO DO ON A FRIDAY NIGHT.

I COULD'VE WENT TO ONE OF THE THREE PARTIES THAT WERE SUPPOSEDLY BEING HELD THIS EVENING. BUT I HAVE A BETTER SELECTION OF BOOZE AT MY HOUSE AND I DON'T HAVE TO SHARE. (SORRY MRS. JOHNSON!!)

THE ONLY QUESTION COMING TO MIND RIGHT NOW, AND I AM GOING TO BLAME IT ON MY BEING TIRED, IS WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE COLOR? WHY?

MINE IS BLUE. I LIKE THE SHADE OF BLUE THE NIGHT SKY IS WHEN IT'S IN THE MIDDLE OF SUMMER AND IT'S A NEW MOON, AND YOU CAN SEE NOTHING BUT STARS FOR MILES AND MILES NO MATTER WHAT DIRECTION YOU LOOK. I THINK A PARTICULAR CAR'S SHADE OF BLUE PAINT IS PRETTY COOL TOO. I LIKE THE SHADE OF BLUE ON A BRIGHT WINTER DAY. SOMETIMES IT SEEMS LIKE THE SKY'S BLUER IN WINTER. I LIKE THE SHADE OF BLUE PEOPLES EYES ARE. HOW THEY CAN CHANGE SOMETIMES. SOME OF THEM EVEN APPEARING GRAY.

Steve tossed his notebook to the floor, his pen following quickly behind.

Had he really said with no particular clarity, that he liked the color of Billy Hargrove's car? It was a pretty shade of blue. He couldn't deny that.

He wonders if Mrs. Johnson will be happy with him for figuring out the assignment's purpose so early.

Did he sound like a spoiled rich kid that got to travel the world? Maybe. Did he care? Nope.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-

The phone ringing woke Steve up from a nap he didn't remember falling asleep for. He was downstairs on the couch and had to

stumble to the kitchen for the nearest phone.

“Hello, Harrington residence.”

He hated having to say that, but it was a must given who his parents are and their lines of work.

“Hey buddy, it’s me, your pal Dustin, listen, can you do me a solid and come pick Max and I up from the junk yard?”

Steve furrowed his brows, “Uh, why are you and Max at the junkyard?”

His mind immediately went to the night Max was exposed to the Upside Down. How he was terrified but ready to protect the kids.

“Well you see, the thi—“ “Hi Steve, it’s Max. Dustin is refusing to tell you that I was the only one *stupid* enough to agree to help him with one of his science experiments, and we were collecting samples of something or other he *desperately* needed. The idiot needs more storage for his samples, so if you could also bring him some sandwich baggies, that’d be great too.”

He could also hear Max admonishing Dustin—he really did like her. She was good for the boys. She didn’t take any of their shit and she told them exactly how it was.

“Sure Max, not a problem. Give me like ten to get myself together, and then I’ll head on over to you guys. And tell Dustin that his bike stays there, and he owes you quarters for making this phone call from the payphone.”

She laughed and hung up.

He hung up the phone and stretched. He could go as is, but he was still in the clothes he wore to school yesterday, and he sniffed himself, he could use a quick shower.

He settled on changing all of his clothes and threw on one of his sweat bands, make it look like his hair was a little off due to exercise. Not that he had anyone in particular to impress, he just knew he could be a little bit vain about his hair.

He grabbed the entire box of sandwich baggies his mom kept in the pantry and headed out to his car. What could Dustin possibly be collecting at the junk yard? Dirt? Mold? Rust?

He knew it shouldn't take him more than a few minutes to cross town to the junkyard, maybe he'd see if they were hungry—he glanced at the clock on his dashboard, it wasn't quite one o'clock, lunch sounded good.

He let the top 40 station play as background noise, he really wasn't paying attention. If he was being honest with himself, he was still kind of freaking out about his stupid letter. He'd definitely ask Mr. Watkins if he'd tossed out any papers on the ground on Monday morning.

He also started thinking about who his partner could be. He knew none of the girls could write like that, and he knew that Jason Walker, and Tim Lane were the other two that struggled with letters and reading like he did. That left Four more guys it could be. And if he was correct about the person in a stalemate being a sibling, all four of them were contenders because all four of them had siblings.

But of those four, would any of them actually promise not to tell anyone about anything Steve's said so far in his letters? Making the suggestion like they did was a genuinely decent intention, and he really appreciated it, but even that didn't seem like something Billy Hargrove, Mason Swift, Charlie Cumberland, or Jimmy Rogers would do. None of them were as outright of an asshole like Hargrove, but they weren't exactly the nice boy-next-door type either.

Mason gets caught smoking in the boys bathroom more than anyone else—why doesn't he go out to the bleachers like everyone else? He also shoves the poor mathlete team into trashcans. Charlie plays football; he and his teammates are stereotypical jock bullies. And Jimmy, Jimmy's whole family is known by Hopper and the surrounding cities police departments. Now that he thinks about it, he's kind of shocked that Mrs. Johnson said everyone in the class was participating.

Curse of a small town—you know everything about everyone—except this assignment was proving that notion wrong.

He could see Dustin and Max leaning against the payphone that stood outside of the junkyard. Dustin started waving enthusiastically.

He pulled up, parked, and climbed out. "First, nothing you are putting into my car is going leave residue? No lingering smell?"

Dustin shook his head.

"Second, I'm hungry, you guys hungry?"

Max grinned and nodded, Dustin, "Like you had to ask. We've been out here for ages. I'm starving!"

Steve smiled, "Get your stuff and come on then, we'll hit up the diner on the way back to your houses. Or am I taking you somewhere else? Arcade? The Wheeler's? Will's?"

Dustin opened the passenger door and grabbed the box of baggies and disappeared back into the junkyard. Max looked after him before turning back to Steve, "I have to get home. Neil's in a mood this weekend. He actually doesn't know I'm not in my room."

"And you still want to get lunch?"

She just grinned, "Go big or go home. I'm already out, might as well enjoy my freedom while I have it."

"You have a curfew on a Saturday, when it's still daylight out?"

She shook her head. "Sometimes Billy fucks up, well, *according to Neil* he fucks up, and when Billy fucks up, the entire family suffers. Billy's just an asshole, but Neil, I have no idea what my mom sees in him because he makes Billy look like a saint in comparison."

Steve's stomach twisted at Max's words. "Does he ever do anything to you?"

"No. I mean, he gets like that dad voice sometimes, you know when they're trying to be stern because they're the *man of the house*, or whatever, but it's usually always Billy. He tends to, not ignore me, but we know to stay clear of each other. We're both only here for my mom and we know that about each other and we respect it. Plus, he

knows if I said he reminded me of *my* dad, mom would pack his stuff up and send him packing before he could blink.”

Steve realized as Dustin came around the corner of the entrance, this is the most he’s ever heard from Max, and about the Hargrove household—ever.

“Are you trying to sell Billy to Steve by telling him about your stepdad being the biggest douche bag to ever exist? Because need I remind you, you had to put a needle in your step-brother’s neck and threaten him with the bat before he stopped beating the shit out of Steve.”

“She’s not selling me on anyone. She was just sharing with the class.”

Steve didn’t know how to interpret the look Max gave him.

“Susan is pretty quiet, and it’s always the quiet ones you have to look out for. I’ve heard some of the things that Neil says to Billy, but I’m pretty sure that if we ever pissed Susan off, she’d be more terrifying than a Demogorgon. Or Nancy Wheeler with a gun.”

Max turned and gave Dustin a look, “Since when do you know so much about my mom?”

Dustin flushed, “Uh, she was grocery shopping and I think your stepdad tried to sneak something in the cart and I’ve never seen a woman still a man with a look that could kill so fast. He walked away like he was embarrassed. I did call out to her and brought attention to the fact that I did just see what happened, but she smiled at me and asked about my mom. They apparently go to the same book club or something. So, lunch? We still going, or are we going to braid each other’s hair while we tell each other our whole life stories? ‘Cause we all know that the one thing we have in common is all of our dads are assholes.”

Steve absentmindedly nodded, then found himself laughing before telling them, “Get in nerds.”

Max laughed and climbed in the front seat while Dustin spluttered in disbelief.

Steve looked at him over the top of the car and shrugged his shoulders, “Sorry buddy, she claimed it before you even had a chance.”

Dustin climbed in the back and Steve made sure they were buckled up before pulling off.

“Can I get a milkshake?”

Steve glanced in the rear-view mirror at Dustin’s cheesy grin, “Sure buddy.”

“If he’s getting one, I’m getting extra fries. It’s only fair.”

Steve nodded to Max, “Can do.”

She smiled and reached over to turn up the radio, but hesitated, she glanced over at Steve and he nodded for her to go ahead.

Dustin groaned in the backseat, “My mom plays this song all the time! The movie came out in January—that was *months* ago!”

Steve and Max laughed and she turned it up even more.

“Don’t tell him I told you this, but Billy can do the dances from the movie.”

“You’re shitting us Max, no way. I don’t buy it,” Dustin yelled from the backseat.

Steve had no idea what to think. From what he knew of Billy Hargrove, that didn’t seem like something he would just do, but if it was to impress someone, a girl maybe, then maybe a small chance, he’d do it.

“It’s true! I promise! He was in his room with his walkman and had no idea I’d come in to ask if he wanted to order a pizza or make something for dinner, mom and Neil were out on their date night. He has no idea I know. He didn’t catch me.”

Steve found himself nodding along, “I’m just trying to wrap my head around the fact that a guy like Billy actually saw the movie to learn

the dance steps.”

“That was probably the closest I’d seen him to how he was before we moved here. He and his friends were always doing crazy shit back in California, but it was kind of the norm. It’s very laid back, and I know we didn’t have curfews, not like we do here. But that’s also before I found Billy with anoth—uh, you know since we’re already on this side of town, can you just drop me off?”

Steve noticed her entire demeanor had changed. She almost looked guilty of something. How she went so quickly from laughing and joking and then mentioning one thing setting her off. Maybe she just really missed California. Surely there wasn't anything Max could've done to Billy that would warrant her feeling guilty.

“Yeah, I can.”

Her quiet thank you bothered him for some reason.

5. The Lesser of Two Evils

Notes for the Chapter:

The love y'all are giving this fic helps warm my cold heart! Thank you so much! <3 :D

If I've missed any mishaps please let me know!

I have been toying with the idea to do one (or a few) chapter(s) from Billy's POV about this whole thing, but I'm on the fence with it. If I do, it might be a little further down the line, as in more notes, like weeks into the assignment, not just here in the beginning.

I hope y'all enjoy this bit!

PS: It might be a hot minute until the next update. I'm going home for Independence Day, and will be gone for a week; my vacation starts Friday! If I have time to work on this, I might, but I won't make a promise I might not be able to keep. So if no updates occur for over a week, I haven't abandoned ship, I'm just on vacation!

“You can’t hide from me forever you know?”

Steve groaned into the throw pillow he held over his face as Nancy Wheeler stood over the back of the couch. She was smiling, like she used to smile at him when they were dating.

“Steve, seriously, come on; I came over to talk to you. Tell me what’s going on with you.”

He put the pillow down and sat up, “What do you want me to say Nance? We’re not together anymore, you can’t call us—*me*, bullshit and expect us to be best friends afterwards.”

He’s finally stopped flinching when she makes that hurt face. He’d felt guilty for so long, like it was *his* fault they ended.

“Why are you here Nance? Isn’t Sunday the one day you and Jonathan both have free to spend with each other without interruptions?”

“You don’t have to be a jerk about it.”

He raised his eyebrow at her and she shrank back a little, “And you don’t have any right to know about how I’m doing because need I remind you, *again*, you called me **bullshit**.”

“You still matter to me, as a friend. I still care about how you’re doing Steve.”

“And you’re deflecting, trouble in paradise?”

She rolled her eyes and sat down. She wasn’t going to leave until he actually talked to her. He should’ve known better.

“No, they’re actually having a family outing, with Jim and El. He did ask if I could come along, but Will and El were adamant it was a family outing. She even vetoed Mike going.”

“No offense, but your brother’s a bit of an asshole.”

She threw a pillow at him and smiled, “I know, but you say that in front of my mom and she’ll cry.”

“Speaking of your mom, every time I stop by she’s always asking me about Billy Hargrove. What’s that about?”

Nancy rolled her eyes, “You remember the night we stopped everything, well apparently *Billy* stopped by looking for Max. Dad didn’t answer the door, he’d fallen asleep in his chair, nothing out of the ordinary. Mom came down from her bath in her robe and apparently Billy flirted with her, it uh, struck something in her. She asks me some days too.”

They met each other’s eyes and started laughing.

“We were friends first, so I guess I can give it a go again. That doesn’t mean you’re off the hook for hurting me like you did though.”

She smiled at him, "Thank you. I appreciate your honesty, and I'll tell you how sorry I am for as long as it takes for it to sink in."

"Can I ask you something that's going to sound really random?"

Nancy nodded.

"Could you tell, when you were helping with my college letters, that I uh, I'm dyslexic?"

"Honestly, no, I just thought you had no idea how to spell or put your thoughts down in order. That's why I kept reminding you of the outlines we were encouraged to do before every essay in class. You should've said something! Now I feel like a jerk for how harsh I was."

He waved her off, "It's fine, really. Uh, Mrs. Johnson is pretty awesome and she's helped me a lot. She gets me the audio books for whatever we're reading in class, or she makes one herself for me."

"Oh, I've been meaning to ask you, but you've been bailing on lunch, how's her project going? Jenny says she already knows who her partner is. But that's only because she recognized their handwriting from having another class with them."

Steve felt his face burn and he was positive his ears were turning pink; "Uh, mine, my partner is actually pretty decent. Of the whole class, there's only seven guys out of twenty-four students, so it's one of them. I don't know who yet, but they uh, they offered a suggestion once I admitted that I'm dyslexic."

"Can I see one of the letters?"

He shook his head, "I, I uh, I promised I'd keep their secrets if they keep mine."

She smiled at him, "That's great actually. You think you and he could become good friends after this?"

"I want to think so, but given who's in my class, it's kind of a long shot."

"The options can't be that bad!"

“Just remember, *you* asked. Okay, Jason Walker, Tim Lane, but they both are like me and struggle with letters and stuff, so I know it’s not one of them. So that just leaves Billy Hargrove, Mason Swift, Charlie Cumberland, or Jimmy Rogers, and I have no idea how to process things if it’s one of them. I mean I *know* it’s one of them, but of the four of them, what’s already been shared, I just can’t imagine it being one of them.”

He watched her reactions as each name was said and her face said it all—none of them were ideal.

“I know; that’s exactly how I felt when I figured it out picking up Dustin and Max yesterday. Tell your brother to lighten up on Max. She got stuck helping Dustin with a science experiment because none of the other kids filled her in on the fact that he’s a bit into science.”

“Mike, I’m pretty sure started to have a crush on Max before El came back and just didn’t want to admit it, but still, like he’s so smitten with El it’s disgustingly adorable. He likes strong, independent ladies. But then Dustin and Lucas told him that they liked Max and they’d let her choose which one she liked, if any of them. Plus he admitted to me the other night that he wonders if our dad’s in the closet because of how unhappy he and mom are. I had to ask him *why* and *where* that thought came from. He told me Will, Will doesn’t know if he likes boys or girls, and he’s confused about it. Which is normal for their age, like things are changing and all that, and then on top of all the Upside Down stuff, crushes should be the last thing on all of their minds.”

It wasn’t the last thing on yours Steve thought to himself.

“Sorry, Steve, I’m pretty sure this is not even remotely where you wanted or thought me coming by was going to go.”

He shrugged, “It’s not a big deal. Will’s a cool kid. Sometimes I’ll make sure he’s the last kid to drop off if you or Jonathan don’t come get him, and we talk, ‘cause like, you know sometimes you need that outside perspective. He asked me how I knew I had feelings for you, or any other girl I’ve been with, and so I told him the truth. I told him how I felt with all of the girls I’ve had feelings for.”

Nancy looked a little shocked and Steve took a little bit of offense to that; “I forget how good you are with The Party. You really are a great babysitter. The kids really like you and they think it’s cool that you actually hang out with them and *do* things with them. Jon and I have to be bribed sometimes, and I can’t imagine Max persuading Billy to join in on a crusade, or whatever it is they call it.”

Steve wanted to tell her that Will admitted that he does feel like that sometimes, but it’s not for any of the girls at his school. He definitely wasn’t going to say that he told Will he knows exactly how it feels to crush on a guy.

“That’s me, shitty boyfriend, awesome babysitter. I’m their White Knight in that game they play, but it’s not always a D&D thing, some nights we go to the movies. Sometimes we play board games, and some nights we go to the diner and I buy them burgers and milkshakes and they just talk shit about everything. They’re a good bunch of kids. Scary smart too, they could plot world domination and I wouldn’t even realize it.”

They smiled at each other. Nancy reached out and squeezed his hand closest to her.

“Thanks for this Steve. I, I know what I said and did to you was the actual bullshit. It was never you and I’m sorry if I ever made you feel like it was your fault. Will you have lunch with Jon and I tomorrow?”

He nodded, “Yeah, about that, I uh, I noticed on my way to the library—yes, that’s where I’ve been hiding out—that some kids take their lunch and sit in front of their lockers, or just any lockers. You guys be up for that?”

“And perpetuate the rumors that I’m fucking the both of you? Or that you’re the one fucking Jon and I?”

“For such a small town, the kids of Hawkins are sure invested in who’s fucking who.”

“I’ll run it by Jon; we’ll meet you in front of the cafeteria. I’ll get out of your hair, but really Steve, thanks for this. I’ve been wanting to talk to you for a while now and I just didn’t know how.”

He nodded, "I get it, I do, but thanks for understanding that you hurt me. I think that's what bothered me the most, is it felt like you didn't care about hurting my feelings. I'm sorry too."

She stood and stretched, then smiled down at him, "Steve, you were not the problem in our relationship. That was all me, and I'm sorry."

"Drive safe Nance. I'll see you tomorrow."

He walked her to the door but didn't watch her until she got in her car, as soon as she stepped off the porch he shut the door and ran up to his room. He felt like he needed to tell his partner about what just happened.

He momentarily froze in his doorway; he'd have to clean his room tomorrow. He definitely wasn't going to do it now. He spied out his notebook and picked it up and sat down on his bed—the only clear space in his room at the moment.

He reread what he wrote and decided that while he was an idiot, he wasn't going to change anything. He'd just add to it.

I THOUGHT I WAS DONE WRITING TO YOU OVER THE WEEKEND, BUT APPARENTLY I WAS MISTAKEN.

MY EX CAME BY TODAY AND TALKED TO ME, LIKE FULL BLOWN CONVERSATION ABOUT HOW SORRY THEY ARE/WERE, WHATEVER TENSE I'M SUPPOSED TO USE THERE, BUT BOTH FIT.

AND THE THING IS, I TOLD THEM IT WAS OKAY. IT WAS OKAY AND I FINALLY FORGAVE THEM BECAUSE THEY FINALLY ADMITTED THEY WERE THE PROBLEM AND WERE TREATING ME LIKE IT WAS MY FAULT. I WAS HONEST WITH THEM TOO. I TOLD THEM MY FEELINGS HAD BEEN HURT.

WE WERE FRIENDS FIRST, BEFOR WE STARTED DATING, AND I MEAN, I THINK IT HELPED MAKE OUR RELATIONSHIP LAST LONGER THAN ANY OF MY OTHER ONES.

WE ALSO TALKED ABOUT ONE OF THE KIDS WE KNOW. THEY'RE AT THAT AGE WHERE GIRLS AND BOYS CONFUSE

THEM. THEY'RE NOT SURE WHERE THEY STAND, BUT THEY KNOW THEY'LL GET SO MUCH SHIT FROM SOME PEOPLE IF THEY DO FIGURE IT OUT AND IT'S BOYS. PLEASE DON'T BE AN ASSHOLE. I KNOW WE'RE IN A SMALLTOWN, BUT NOT EVERYONE'S AS CLOSED OFF WITH OPINIONS.

I TRY TO TALK TO THEM WHENEVER WE GET A MOMENT TO TALK, ALONE. THEY JUST WANT SOMEONE WHO UNDERSTANDS. I TRY. I MEAN I CAN ONLY UNDERSTAND BUT SO MUCH.

I ALSO WANTED TO SAY THAT I'VE NARROWED IT DOWN TO WHO YOU COULD BE, AND EVEN KNOWING THAT YOU'RE ONE OF THE FOUR CHOICES I'VE NARROWED IT DOWN TO, YOU'VE SURPRISED ME ALREADY. ESPECIALLY WITH YOUR SUGGESTION FOR HELPING ME—I DEFINITELY WOULDN'T HAVE EXPECTED IT FROM YOU. I'M SORRY FOR HOW HORRIBLE THAT SOUNDS TOO.

I JUST HOPE YOU DON'T THINK MY OBNOXIOUS, LONG LETTER TOMORROW IS WEIRD.

Steve couldn't imagine just wanting to talk to Billy Hargrove, or Mason Swift, or Charlie Cumberland, or Jimmy Rogers, but whoever was on the other end of his letters; he hoped they could be friends, maybe, at the end of this assignment.

He knew that if he had to choose in this moment, right now, which one he'd prefer it to be, it was a hard choice to make. Billy Hargrove is a grade-A asshole. He knows they all are, but at least the other three haven't actually beaten the shit out of him. They didn't have to be stopped by a girl with a syringe full of drugs, and a baseball bat full of nails to get him to stop. Mason Swift, no offense to him, but Steve just knew it wasn't him. His gut was telling him Mason didn't have it in him to be as intellectual as his partner. Something he didn't know about Billy, but he tried not to think about Billy Hargrove, period.

Charlie Cumberland was a huge possibility. He knew that Charlie got in trouble last season due to his coach finding him on steroids, but it turned out it was because he had mono or something that required

him to be on steroids to fight whatever it was off. It sounded fishy to Steve, but it was what it was. Jimmy Rogers, well, he was like Mason, there was just something about someone being on a first name basis with more than one police station that didn't sit well with Steve. Someone with that kind of family background, he didn't actively associate with the kind of guy wanting a library in his house when he grows up.

So it was either Billy Hargrove, or Charlie Cumberland. Max had said something about Billy being an asshole like all the time, but he was angrier since they moved here. He has a whole background that Steve knows nothing about—not that he wants to. Max did seem like she did something to Billy. Yesterday was really weird. It was like a switch was turned off in her. Steve didn't really know much about Charlie's little brother, but he definitely didn't hang out with The Party. Maybe he'd ask them questions about Max, and the younger Cumberland boy, and see if they could get information for him.

As he lie there staring up at his ceiling, he started to imagine Billy, and Charlie, playing board games with him and The Party. He's not sure if they would play Monopoly like a normal person, or if they got mad, like both are prone to do, and fling the board and everything on it across the room. El did that her first time playing. Mike had to buy her like six boxes of eggos to make up for it.

Even though his gut was telling him his partner was a guy, he also knew that he couldn't rule out **all** of the girls. But he couldn't explain how or why, but he just knows it's another boy he's talking to.

He glanced at his alarm clock, 4:26pm. Maybe he'd get enough sleep so that when he undoubtedly woke up early tomorrow morning, in the middle of the night, he'd have gotten more sleep than usual.

The last thought he had before drifting off to sleep was of the two guys from class, he hopes it's Charlie—the lesser of two evils.

6. Four to One

Notes for the Chapter:

Uh, hey guys, uh, sorry I took longer than expected to update...

Vacation was great. A week at home was just what I needed.

Last weekend I celebrated the soon arrival of my roomie from college and one of my best friends, her baby shower. That was an impromptu road trip with someone I hadn't spoken to in 4 years. We literally ended on the shittiest of terms and then chose to spend the car ride up and back from our mutual friend together. Wasn't as bad as either of us were anticipating.

I know I have Slow Burn tagged, and it still is, despite the happenings in this chapter...so proceed with whatever you need to.

My laptop is a dinosaur so this was typed up in Google Docs so I have no idea if I caught all my mishaps.

I DON'T HAVE THE GUTS TO JUST KNOW THAT I'M THE SMARTEST PERSON IN THE ROOM, I KNOW THAT I AM SMARTER THAN MOST OF MY PEERS. IT'S NOT A HARD CONCLUSION TO COME TO WHEN HALF OF THE KIDS IN MY CLASSES FALL ASLEEP THROUGHOUT THE LESSON AND HAVE ZERO CONCEPT OF WHAT'S GOING ON WHEN THEY'RE CALLED ON TO ANSWER QUESTIONS.

I'M BOOK SMART AND I'M STREET SMART. SOME PEOPLE ARE BOTH, SOME ARE ONE OR THE OTHER. SOME PEOPLE ARE

SMART IN ONLY ONE SUBJECT AND SOME PEOPLE ARE SMART IN OTHER FACETS THAT IT SHOULDN'T MATTER THE LEVEL OF "SMART" SOMEONE IS DEEMED. IT'S NOT A FAIR MEASURING SCALE IN THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS TO SOLELY FOCUS ON HOW WELL SOMEONE DOES IN SCHOOL.

PEOPLE CAN BE SMART IN A VARIETY OF WAYS. YOU SHOULDN'T EVER ALLOW ANOTHER PERSON TO HOLD WEIGHT OVER HOW SMART YOU ARE. EVEN WITH JUST THESE FEW LETTERS, I CAN TELL YOU'RE SMART. SMARTER THAN YOU GIVE YOUR OWN SELF CREDIT FOR.

LOVE, YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT LOVE? LOVE IS A JOKE. ESPECIALLY FOR US TEENAGERS. SURE WE KNOW WHAT WE FEEL AND WE ACT UPON THOSE FEELINGS, WHICH LEAD TO SPECIFIC URGES, BUT TO BE FULLY COMMITTED TO SOMEONE, THAT TAKES GUTS. GUTS I DON'T HAVE.

I TEND TO BE THE ONE THAT EMOTIONALLY CHECKS OUT LONG BEFORE I SHOULD JUMP SHIP, AND I DON'T MAKE IT OBVIOUS TO THE OTHER PERSON EITHER. IT'S NOT FAIR BUT I'M A BIT SELFISH AND IT'S HOW I PROTECT MYSELF.

COULD IT CHANGE ONE DAY? MAYBE. WITH THE RIGHT PERSON I THINK ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE.

AM I SAYING THAT I'D CHANGE WHO I AM AS A PERSON FOR SOMEONE THAT I LOVE? NO. I'M SAYING THAT IF I EVER GET TO THE POINT WHERE I'M WILLING TO COMPROMISE LIKE THAT, AND THEY ARE TOO , I'LL KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE IN LOVE. I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER FELT IT BEFORE.

LOVE IS ANYTHING BUT BULLSHIT (AND YES, I KNOW WHAT I JUST SAID!). ANYONE WHO TELLS YOU OTHERWISE ISN'T WORTH YOUR TIME. OR ANYONE'S TIME REALLY. THAT'S A SHITTY THING TO SAY AND I'M NOT SURE I'D READILY FORGIVE THEM EITHER.

YOU'RE A VERY EMOTIONAL PERSON. IT COMES THROUGH IN YOUR WRITING. NOT VERY MANY PEOPLE CAN DO THAT. I BET YOU WROTE YOUR LETTER IN A RUSH BECAUSE OF HOW

EMOTIONAL IT MADE YOU FEEL. RECALLING ALL THOSE "NEGATIVE" FEELINGS CAN MESS WITH YOU. I'M FAIRLY CERTAIN YOU ALMOST DIDN'T WANT TO WRITE THAT LETTER BECAUSE OF HOW THE ASSIGNMENT MADE YOU FEEL. I ALMOST DIDN'T WRITE THAT PART MYSELF.

YOU THINK YOU SAW STAR WARS? HOW DO YOU NOT KNOW IF YOU SAW STAR WARS OR NOT? I'LL SPARE YOU THE IN DEPTH CONVERSATION I HAD WITH MY KID-SISTER. WE ARGUED OVER EVERY LITTLE DETAIL. I TOLD YOU I'M A FUCKING NERD. OR RATHER, I CAN BE A NERD.

I WISH I DIDN'T CARE WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK OF ME. RIGHT NOW, I'M WONDERING IF YOU'RE GOING TO THINK I'M WEIRD FOR WRITING YOU OVER THE WEEKEND DESPITE MRS. JOHNSON NOT GIVING US AN ASSIGNMENT. I KNOW THAT ONCE YOU REALIZE WHO I AM, ANYTHING YOU'VE THOUGHT ABOUT ME BEING THE PERSON THAT I AM, YOU'RE GOING TO KNOW I'M A FUCKING MESS OF A HUMAN BEING. I'VE ALSO BEEN TOLD MOST OF MY LIFE THAT I LOOK A CERTAIN WAY AND IF THAT'S HOW I WANT TO PRESENT MYSELF TO OTHER PEOPLE, THAT'S A PROBLEM.

I'M GOING TO END HERE THOUGH, I SHOULD HEAD BACK HOME. THIS ISN'T EXACTLY THE KIND OF HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT MY OLD MAN WOULD UNDERSTAND/APPROVE OF. I LEFT A PARTY EARLY TO WRITE YOU , IT WAS BORING. IN FACT THEY ALL ARE LATELY FOR SOME REASON. MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE THEY'RE ALL THE SAME, JUST DIFFERENT LOCATIONS.

Steve couldn't help but smile down at the letter in his lap. Mrs. Johnson had found him upon his arrival and hand delivered his letter. She informed him that some other students had written letters over the weekend, but not enough to hand them out in class and give away who potentially had who.

"Are you sure you and your partner aren't writing *actual* love letters to each other? That smile you have on your face is pretty telling."

Steve felt himself burn with embarrassment at Nancy's words.

"No, we just had similar thoughts over the weekend. It's nice to have someone who understands sometimes."

He hated her sympathetic smile. He hated Jonathan's even more.

"Well isn't this a site to behold, Wheeler keeping her pets fed."

Steve hated the way all three of them flinched at the arrival of Billy Hargrove.

Billy stood, looming over them, oddly alone. None of his lemmings were around.

He glanced down at Steve, his minute reaction to the letter in the latter's lap went mostly unnoticed. His eyes met with Jonathan's before he opened his mouth again, "I have to ask, how does this *ménage à trois* work? The masses want to know!"

Nancy got to her feet and smiled sweetly at him, "You really want to know what we do?"

Nancy crowded into his personal space, "It's Monday, and on Mondays *Stevie* does all the work. His tongue deserves all the rumors it gets. And his dick, well, let's just say that we are *never disappointed*. You interested in joining us?"

They could tell he was not expecting that response. He looked a little flustered and couldn't get a word out.

Nancy held her sweet smile and remained in his space.

"I'm uh, I'm not sure if I'm the uh, sharing type." That's all he said before glancing at each one of them and walking away.

They at least waited until he rounded the corner before bursting out in laughter.

"You are a horrible, yet wonderful woman, Nancy Wheeler."

She grinned at Jonathan, "Thanks."

“You guys really need to stop feeding into the rumors that I’m doing the both of you. You know how horrible some of his friends are.”

“You know it’s Monday, and on Mondays we take the kids to my house for homework, games, and dinner.”

Nancy rolled her eyes at both Steve and Jonathan, “You’re both so great at killing the mood.”

She sat down in between Steve and Jonathan, patted both on their thighs, “Maybe he’ll leave you alone for a few days now that I made him uncomfortable. I did find it a little bit strange that he wasn’t put off by you doing both of us, but that he’s not into sharing.”

Steve didn’t even want to know what the look on her face meant. Did she mean that Billy would not *mind* being with Steve, or Jonathan? Or *boys* in general?

He knew that a few of his mom’s friends were homosexuals, but they didn’t flaunt it around his dad, or anywhere really. When he first learned that they were *partners* he was shocked. Not because they were two men, but because they didn’t fit the stereotype that his dad, and people like his dad, painted.

His mom talked about a house they had out in New York, he thinks it’s in a place called Cherry Grove. She said Steve would love it there. She’s never taken him with her when she goes for a visit though. Maybe he’ll ask her about it the next time she’s home.

“I think I’m going to head out. I could go for a run.”

Steve pointedly didn’t look at either of them as he bid them goodbye. He tossed a halfhearted wave their direction and headed towards the gym.

He didn’t need their shared looks of concern.

Rationally he knows that Jonathan isn’t a bad guy, and he practically threw him into Nancy’s lap that night at the party. It just sucked watching how much happier she was with him.

Like maybe he was just a shitty boyfriend and that was his lot in life.

Maybe he really is bullshit.

He made quick work of changing into his gym clothes and stuffing his things into his gym locker.

Upon reaching the track, he noticed that someone was already running. He couldn't make them out, but he did a few stretches and got to it.

He wasn't going to push himself because Jon was right, it is Monday, and on Mondays they all go to the Byers'. He usually does homework and helps Joyce with dinner. Slowly learning how to make things in the kitchen.

He kept a steady pace. Allowed the rhythm of his feet hitting the track be the only thing he focused on.

He didn't want to dwell on his hang ups with Nancy, and by default, Jonathan.

He didn't want to think about graduation and what he was *supposed* to do afterwards.

He didn't want to think about leaving Hawkins for good, and something from the Upside Down showing up. He couldn't live with himself if something happened to one of those kids.

He didn't want to think about the fact that his partner telling him that he has a kid-sister narrows his options from four to one--Billy Hargrove.

That realization has Steve stop abruptly in his tracks. He stumbles a few steps but catches himself.

"Didn't know you were that out of shape, Harrington."

Of course it would be Billy Hargrove who was also running. It would be Billy Hargrove who shows up at the moment Steve realized who he's been talking to so far.

"What is your fucking deal? I get it man, you hate my guts, so leave me the hell alone!"

He's glad those are the words that came out of his mouth and not something from their letters.

Billy put his hands up and took a step back, "For what it's worth, I don't hate you, and I'm sorry."

"Six months, six fucking months, and that's how you apologize for almost killing me? You're lucky you didn't cause me any real damage! You've had it out for me since you got here and I didn't do anything to you!"

Steve hadn't realized he'd pushed Billy with each statement. Billy had let him.

"You were going after a kid; Lucas is just a kid! I wasn't going to stand for that, not with what we were already dealing with that night. You come along pissed off at the goddamn world and took it out on all of us. You're an asshole!"

Steve took a step back upon realizing just how Billy's space he'd gotten.

"Feel better getting all that out, pretty boy? Your panties unwadded now?"

Steve narrowed his eyes--this, *this* was the same guy who was writing those letters he'd been getting? Yeah fucking right.

"Eat my shorts you asshole!"

"I beat you once before, I have no problem doing it again, Harrington. And nobody's here to stop me this time around."

Steve wanted nothing more than to tackle the other boy to the ground and beat the shit out of him, but he knew this close to graduation they wouldn't let him walk and his mother would lose her mind. Let alone the whole *I'm-so-disappointed-in-you-Steve* speech from his father.

"You're not worth my time, or my effort, Hargrove. The sooner that clicks in your thickheaded brain, the sooner you can leave me the hell alone."

Steve turned around and walked off. He ignored Billy's call of his name--thankful that he hadn't followed.

Steve just grabbed his bag from his locker and went to his car. He could have his mom call the school tomorrow and tell them he had an appointment and she forgot to write a note. They never questioned her phone calls--despite her never actually being in town when she makes them.

He climbed in his car and yelled the moment his door slammed shut.

He hit the steering wheel and yelled some more.

He *wanted* to like the person at the other end of his letters.

He'd started to like the person on the other side of those letters.

Now, now he didn't even want to finish the assignment. Not if he was going to be writing to and getting letters from *Billy Hargrove* .

Weeks into a months long assignment and he was already done.

Without thinking he grabbed his backpack and pulled out a notebook. If Mrs. Johnson wanted them to be honest, then that's what Steve would do. He'd be *very* honest.

He started to write.

7. Friends Don't Lie

Notes for the Chapter:

update 2 today, read the previous chapter first (if you haven't already!)

i literally have no idea how long i plan for this to be, but i have no intentions of ending anytime soon...if that helps?

again, google docs thing, which i adore 'cause i can write on my phone too...but uh, any mishaps, my bad!

YOU'RE RIGHT, I AM EMOTIONAL. I HAVE THEM AND I FEEL THEM AND I WILL NOT APOLOGIZE FOR IT.

DO YOU EVER, OR HAVE YOU EVER, HAD SOMEONE HATE YOU FOR NO REASON? MAKE YOUR LIFE A LIVING HELL?

I DO. I HAVE SOMEONE WHO HATES ME FOR NO REASON, AND THEY MAKE MY LIFE HELL, AND FOR WHAT? BEATS ME, I DON'T KNOW!! !

WANT TO KNOW WHAT MY BIG SECRET IS? I ALMOST DIED SIX MONTHS AGO, AND I DON'T CARE . THERE IT IS. THE CAT'S OUT OF THE BAG LADIES AND GENTLEMEN--I DON'T CARE THAT I ALMOST DIED SIX MONTHS AGO. SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE I DID.

SURE I GOT MY ASS HANDED TO BE BY SOME ASSHOLE PISSED OFF AT THE WORLD, BUT HE WASN'T EVEN THE WORST PART OF THAT NIGHT.

I HAD TO FIGHT A DARKNESS THAT NOBODY IN THIS SMALL TOWN WILL EVER KNOW ABOUT. PEOPLE ARE THE WORST

KIND OF MONSTERS THOUGH.

BUT I'M TALKING ABOUT REAL MONSTERS. THINGS SO VILE AND FEAR INDUCING--AND I WON. JUST BARELY. AND I HAD HELP. I HAVE AN ODD GROUP OF FRIENDS AND WE HAD TO DO THINGS THAT YOU WOULD DEFINITELY QUESTION, AND PROBABLY NOT LIKE.

I HEARD ABOUT THE DEATH OF A MAN I KNEW BY ASSOCIATION--A GOOD MAN. A NICE MAN. A MAN WHO TREATED PEOPLE WITH NOTHING BUT KINDNESS.

I KNOW WHO YOU ARE.

I KNOW WHO YOU ARE AND I HATE THAT I HAVE AN EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO THIS FACT.

I HATE THAT I KNOW WHO YOU ARE AND I STILL WANT TO WRITE TO YOU. IF ONLY TO LET YOU KNOW THAT I KNOW WHO YOU ARE NOW AND I AM NOT IMPRESSED.

THE PERSON YOU ARE OUTSIDE OF THESE LETTERS, YOU'RE A DICK! YOU'RE THE BIGGEST ASSHOLE I HAVE EVER MET IN MY ENTIRE LIFE.

YOU ARE A HUMAN DISASTER!!!

Steve tossed his pencil behind him.

He took a deep breath and yelled once more for good measure.

He stared down at the letter he'd just written and immediately knew he could not turn it in. Mrs. Johnson didn't deserve it for once, and two, as much as he didn't want to admit it, neither did Billy Hargrove.

He didn't crumple it up. He didn't tear it out of his notebook either. He kept it. He wanted a reminder of today.

With an ugly sigh, Steve turned around and rooted around for his pencil to write again.

I'M GOING TO BE VERY HONEST HERE--I KNOW WHO YOU ARE. IT STILL DOESN'T CHANGE THE FACT THAT I WANT TO WRITE TO YOU. IT DOESN'T CHANGE THE FACT THAT I'VE LIKED WRITING TO YOU. YOU UNDERSTAND ME IN A WAY THAT NOBODY ELSE EVER HAS. I KNOW IT'S NOT FAIR THAT I KNOW YOU AND YOU, I DON'T THINK, DON'T KNOW WHO I AM.

I'LL TELL YOU MY SECRET THOUGH. AFTER THE DAY I JUST HAD, I DON'T HAVE MUCH CARE LEFT IN ME.

SIX MONTHS AGO I ENCOUNTERED MONSTERS, BOTH HUMAN AND CREATURE, AND I ALMOST DIED. I ALMOST SACRIFICED MYSELF SO THE FRIENDS I WAS WITH, THEY COULD SURVIVE. AND THE THING OF IT IS, I DIDN'T HESITATE, NOT BECAUSE I WAS BEING HEROIC, BUT BECAUSE I WELCOMED THE ABRUPT ENDING OF DEATH. I WOULD HAVE ZERO RESPONSIBILITIES IF I WERE DEAD. ALL THE PRESSURE I'M CURRENTLY UNDER, STILL UNDER, WOULDN'T MATTER ANY MORE.

I'D FIRST THOUGHT, AND WELCOMED DEATH, EARLIER THAT SAME EVENING, AT THE BARE HANDS OF SOMEONE ELSE. I DON'T REMEMBER LOSING CONSCIOUSNESS THAT NIGHT, BUT I REMEMBER BEING IN A HOUSE, AND THEN COMING TO IN THE BACKSEAT OF A CAR.

MY VISION WAS BLURRY, BUT ENOUGH FOCUS TO REALIZE THAT THE KID DRIVING, SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN DRIVING THE CAR! I HAD ENOUGH COMPREHENSION TO REALIZE WHERE WE WERE THE MOMENT I STUMBLED/FELL OUT OF THE CAR--THESE KIDS WERE GOING AFTER THE MONSTERS!

I WRANGLLED THEM, WELL, THE BEST I COULD. I'M A PRETTY GREAT BABYSITTER IF I DO SAY SO MYSELF. I MADE SURE THAT THEY WERE ALL PROTECTED WITH GEAR AND I WENT FIRST DOWN INTO THE PIT OF HELL. IF SOMETHING WAS DOWN THERE AND WAITING, I WANTED IT TO GET ME AND NOT THEM. I WANTED THEM TO HAVE A FIGHTING CHANCE.

WE HAD A CLOSE CALL, BUT WE DID IT. WE GOT TO THE SPOT THEY'D DESIGNATED AS A HUB AND WE TORCHED IT. SET IT ALL ON FIRE AND RAN FOR OUR LIVES BACK TO THE POINT OF

ENTRY. I WILL NEVER GET THE SOUNDS OF THOSE THINGS OUT OF MY HEAD. I'D THOUGHT WE WERE GOING TO DIE, AND SOMETIMES MY NIGHTMARES SHOW ME, ALL OF US, DYING. WE DID LOSE SOMEONE THAT NIGHT THOUGH, ONE OF THE NICEST MEN I'VE EVER MET. I CAN'T SLEEP. NOT WITHOUT HELP ANYWAY.

LOOK, KNOWING YOU HOW I KNOW YOU HERE IN THESE LETTERS, AND HOW I KNOW YOU OUTSIDE OF THEM, IT'S A LOT TO TAKE IN. THAT'S NOT A STAB AT YOU, AT LEAST NOT INTENTIONALLY.

I THINK IF YOU WERE MORE LIKE THE PERSON I WAS WRITING WITH, YOU WOULDN'T HAVE TO CARE WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK. I'M NOT GOING TO SUGAR COAT IT, I ALMOST WENT RIGHT TO MRS. JOHNSON TO ASK HER IF I COULD JUST QUIT THE ASSIGNMENT ONCE I FIGURED OUT IT WAS YOU.

YOU DO IT TO YOURSELF YOU KNOW? HOW OTHERS PERCEIVE YOU IS ALL UP TO HOW YOU TREAT THEM, AND YOU'RE AN ASSHOLE LIKE 100% OF THE TIME. WHICH THROWS ME OFF GIVEN HOW OPEN YOU'VE BEEN WITH ME IN THESE LETTERS.

SO RECAP: I KNOW WHO YOU ARE AND I ACTUALLY DON'T MIND IT. YES, MY MIND IS BLOWN THAT YOU'RE A NERD, AND YOU LIKE BOARD GAMES, BUT LIKE I SAID, I DON'T MIND IT. MY SECRET IS OUT THERE--I DON'T CARE THAT I ALMOST DIED, IN FACT I WELCOMED IT. STILL DO SOMETIMES.

I'M NOT LOOKING FORWARD TO LIFE AFTER GRADUATION BECAUSE I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I WANT TO DO WITH MY LIFE. MY POPS HAS A PLAN FOR ME, BUT THAT'S HIS PLAN FOR MY LIFE, AND I DON'T WANT ANY PARTS OF IT. I MIGHT ASK MY MA IF I COULD GO WITH HER ON ONE OF HER NEXT TRIPS OUT EAST, TO NEW YORK.

I'M HAVING A HARD TIME NOT TELLING YOU WHO I AM NOW THAT I KNOW WHO YOU ARE.

A knock on the passenger side window startled Steve so much he jumped and might have yelped. It was Dustin and Lucas. He reached

over and unlocked the door.

“Hey Buddy, we thought you forgot about us but Nancy said you were working on homework so we walked up to you. You okay? You looked pretty intense writing just now.”

Steve quickly shut his notebook and shoved it in his backpack; “I’m having a hard time with English today. Get in so we can get to the Byers’ house.”

Steve started the car while the boys climbed in, Dustin up front and Lucas in the back. He noticed them sharing a look before they both buckled in.

“What’s going on guys? Spill it.”

They definitely shared a look, Dustin turning around completely in his seat to give Lucas a look.

“Uh, well, you see, the thing is, um, Lucas pal, why don’t you tell Steve here about tonight.”

Steve did not miss Lucas’ eye-roll.

“Look man, Joyce got out the car while we waited for our rides. Max was still waiting for Billy so she was with us, and Joyce asked if she was going to be able to finally join us for a Monday night, but then Billy pulled up to the curb, probably because Joyce was standing with us because he usually makes her walk to his car. She introduced herself and asked if they both would like to come for dinner, to which Max gave Billy this look, and he shrugged and said it was up to the old man, but they would try to make it. Then Nancy showed up and told us you were still here so Joyce drove us up the hill.”

Steve tried not to give a visible reaction to the possibility of seeing Billy yet again today. As far as he was concerned, his letter be damned, he was done with the guy.

“The more the merrier, right? Isn’t that something you kids say?”

Steve started to drive off towards the Byers’. The sooner this day was over the better. He could go home to the big, empty house, and drink

some more rum--he'd finished the whiskey, and try to sleep.

"Steve, you do realize that we can't talk about Upside Down stuff if Billy actually comes, right? Besides, what would we all do together? Billy doesn't look like the kind of guy who wants to play games with a bunch of kids. And OH MY GOSH, El's going to be there! She knows what he did to you! She can't use her powers! Why would Joyce invite that creep to dinner?!"

"Buddy, calm down. Joyce is being the responsible adult and polite might I add, by setting the example to follow. She knows what Billy did in her house, right? You guys did tell her that the destruction of her kitchen wasn't just the, guys? Seriously! You didn't tell her?"

Lucas piped up, "Hey man, we were all a little on edge that night, and him showing up got lost in the details."

"My *FACE* got *lost in the details*? My *concussions* got lost in the details? Oh my god guys, I have to tell her."

The last few minutes of the car ride were spent going over the details of that night, and whether or not they should actually tell Joyce about Billy since he was potentially coming as a guest of Joyce's. They did mutually agree that they would say something only if the blue Camaro was parked.

Steve knew that with how his luck was running today, that blue Camaro was parked right next to Hop's truck.

As they climbed out of his car they noticed the three people standing on the porch, smoking--Joyce, Hopper, and Billy Hargrove.

"Hello boys! Glad you finally made it, go wash up guys; Steve could I borrow you for just a moment?"

He nodded and noticed that Hopper ushered Lucas and Dustin inside, effectively leaving he and Joyce alone with Billy.

She looked at the both of them, noticing their less than relaxed postures, "Look, the kids tell me things, and I *know* things about the both of you that explain a lot of other things, but I am making it *very clear* , here and now, there will be no throwing of fists at this dinner.

Do I make myself clear? Whatever bullshit you two have with each other, it stays outside of my house, got it?"

They both quickly uttered yes ma'am and nodded. She smiled that sweet smile she sometimes gives the kids when they've inadvertently given into whatever she wanted from them in the first place.

"Good, you both can help me in the kitchen while Jim keeps the kids occupied with games Jane wants to learn how to play."

Steve gave Joyce a look at the mention of Jane's name and she gave a small nod--it was all good. Jane knew not to use powers in front of Billy.

She led them into the house and they all tried to ignore the way the living room instantly fell silent upon their entrance.

Steve said hello and waved to everyone, Jane climbed up from her spot on the floor and gave him a small hug. She looked at Billy and everyone held their breath.

"I'm Jane, these are my friends. Do you want to play with us? They're showing me how to play Monopoly."

"I'm Billy, uh, Max's uh, older step-brother. Uh, Mrs. Byers asked if I'd help her with dinner."

"If you want to play with the kids, that's fine too! We just want you to feel welcome Billy."

Jane promptly took him by the arm and led him to sit down next to her. Steve did not miss the looks being thrown around the room. Or the jealousy on Mike's face.

"Jon, why don't you put on some music? Steve, follow me."

She didn't say anything else until they were in the kitchen and the music had started to mingle with the conversation starting up again in the living room.

"Will gave me the riot act when we finally left the boys at your car. He said the rest of the kids, and you especially, would not appreciate

Billy being present tonight. But I know how much Max means to them, and especially El, and I may have put a bug in Max's mom's ear when she came in the shop earlier. She said she and Neil could use a date night out while the kids were safe, together, and taken care of."

She was fishing. This wasn't the first time she and I had our own private conversations over prepping and cooking dinner.

"*That night*, he came here, looking for Max. Apparently his dad was not happy that she wasn't home when he was supposed to have been watching her. He went after Lucas and I stopped him, so he uh, took it out on me."

"The kids didn't tell me who messed your face up. I knew it wasn't from going down in the tunnels, and I still have mixed feelings about that, but thank you for telling me. You know girls at your school talk a lot when they're in public and think nobody can hear them. They talk a lot about Billy."

I had no idea where she was going here. I continued to cut up the onion and crush the garlic before putting them in the pan on the stove.

"Did you know that he hasn't fucked anyone since moving here? Apparently they can't figure out why, so they've chalked it up to him being one of those virgin guys saving it for marriage."

Steve almost cut his finger at her words, "Uh, what, uh, *why* are you telling me this stuff Joyce? He and I aren't friends, not even close."

She shrugged, filling up the pot for noodles and putting it on the stove but not turning the burner on yet.

"Susan's chatty; I get the impression that Mr. Hargrove runs a tight ship at home. Every *thing* and every *one* has its place."

Steve nodded. He got the same impression from some of the things Max says sometimes.

"I was a teenager once, and let me tell you, boys like Billy Hargrove existed back then too. He's not a virgin, but he's not into ladies."

Steve felt his ears burn hot and his heart picked up a rapid beat.

“He puts on a good show, lord knows Karen can’t keep her eyes off of him whenever she spots him around town. I *gently* remind her that he’s a *minor* and to keep her married hands to herself.”

“Uh, Joyce, I uh, why are you telling me all of this?”

He looked over at her and immediately regretted it. She was making connections about the two of them--him and Billy--and Steve was not prepared, nor ready for that kind of conversation.

“Sweetie, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“No! Uh, if, uh, Nancy said something similar earlier today, at lunch.”

Joyce laughed, “She’s a whip that girl. Jon told me about what happened. You do know it’s okay that some boys like boys and girls like girls, and some people like both boys and girls, right?”

“Yes. My mom has two friends, I’ve always called them Uncle Rodney, and Uncle John, my whole life, but uh, she filled me in on their status two years ago. My dad doesn’t think highly of them, or people like them, but that’s him. Ma always tells him to shove his drinks up his ass when he tries to rant about it. But uh, what, are you trying to tell me that you think Billy is gay? That doesn’t excuse his asshole behavior!”

He knew the flash in her eyes meant that she thinks *both* he and Billy are, or at the very least interested in both boys and girls. Well, according to her, Billy was not into girls, but she was implying that Steve likes both.

“Boys like Billy, coming from a place like California where society is a little more laid back, well a lot compared to Hawkins, there’s a lot of rage there. The boys I knew when I was your age, they were full of rage too. They too had dads that ran tight ships, that had *expectations* of them that they could never meet. So no, it doesn’t excuse his shitty behavior, but it does explain, or at least in theory, why he behaves the way he does. I’m sorry Steve, I really didn’t mean to make you

uncomfortable. Oh, the onions are clear now, we can add the crushed tomatoes and whatever seasonings you think would taste good.”

Steve busied himself for a few moments adding the three cans of crushed tomatoes, and reading the labels of Joyce’s spices and herbs. Adding which ones he thought sounded good in spaghetti sauce.

“Joyce, I, Billy’s my partner for our English assignment, and I figured it out today at school and I had a really bad reaction to it.”

He felt her place a hand on his shoulder and give it a squeeze, “You want to talk some more about it? We’ve got a few more minutes while the sauce simmers and the noodles cook.”

He watched her adjust the burners for both the sauce and the noodles and then gestured for the two of them to sit at the kitchen table.

He fiddled with his hands--what did he even say to her?

“You want a drink? You look like you could use one and I did toe the line, I can turn a blind eye for a beer. I won’t even tell Jim,” she said with a wink.

He could only nod.

“He confuses me. A lot. Like, the guy writing me letters can’t be the same guy that beat the shit out of me all those months ago. Then you tell me you think he’s into boys, and Nancy told me the same thing earlier today. Is it me you think he’s into? Or boys in general? I don’t know!

“Like, if his dad’s a dick, which I get the impression is the case, ‘cause Max says shit sometimes that has me second guessing things, and there were times where Billy’d tell Tommy that he’d been in a fight, a bar out of town that actually served him alcohol, but like, Hop knows majority of the cops in surrounding towns and cities and nobody’s going to let a kid looking like Billy in anywhere.

“I knew he wanted to play games before El even asked him, and maybe she picked up on that, because that’s one of the first things he admitted to me in the letters. He likes board games, and thinks I’m a moron for not being into Star Wars. He doesn’t know it’s me he’s

writing to, at least I don't think he does."

She smiled, "Can I ask you something?"

He nodded.

"Does it matter that you know it's him?"

"I uh, immediately after I realized it was him, I was running out on the track at school, and I'd noticed someone else was running too, but I couldn't make 'em out, but it just had to be him. I'd just realized from a kid-sister statement he made that it was him. The other three guys I'd narrowed it down to, they all have brothers or older sisters.

"Anyway, uh, I'd stumbled and stopped running the moment I realized it was him who I'd been writing to, and well it just so happened at that moment he'd approached me, because it *would* be him on the track too. Which he doesn't like to run so I don't know why he was even out there in the first place--he'd told me that too in another letter.

"I'd just walked off after he got shitty with me, went right to my car and then I wrote a letter getting my emotions out. I told him how much of an asshole I think he is. That he's a human disaster and I hate him.

"Then I took a deep breath and started over. It doesn't matter that it's him. I mean I'd known all along that he was a possibility and I'd still carried on writing letters. I admitted that I'd started to like whoever I was writing to, and I did, I do. He's very smart too."

He took the beer Joyce had placed in front of him and downed half of it in one go. She just smiled.

"Stir the noodles, and I'll go check on how the game's going. Thank you for telling me Steve. Your secrets are safe with me, as long as El doesn't pry."

He couldn't help but smile at that. El was a good kid, but sometimes very stubborn when it came to not invading other people's minds.

He stood and moved to the stove, stirring the noodles and checking

the sauce, giving it a good few stirs as well. It smelled good. He hoped it tasted as good as it smelled.

“Hey amigo, I uh, Mrs. Byers sent me in to uh, get the kids some lemonade or fruit punch.”

Steve hated that he'd startled, but pointed to the fridge and turned to the cabinets and counted out cups for everyone. No wonder Joyce chose spaghetti tonight--twelve people.

“Smells good, if that counts for anything.”

Steve could tell Billy was trying to be polite so he tossed a half-assed smile over his shoulder and pointed to the cups he'd gotten down.

“Billy.”

Both boys turned at El's voice in the entryway to the kitchen. She stared at the both of them, and Steve knew that she was reading whatever was going through both of their minds. She smiled a little smile--he guessed it wasn't all bad. He was trying to be nice.

She looked at Steve, “Friends don't lie.”

“Sorry. Friends don't lie.”

She smiled before motioning for Billy once again, “Joyce is helping Dustin and Lucas, she's just as vicious as you playing. I don't know if we'd win with her helping them.”

Billy gave her a small smile, “Tell you what kiddo, can you help me take the cups out, but leave me one for Steve here while he finishes up dinner and I'll be right out? We still have to wait out Max and Nancy's turn, as well as the Byers brothers plus Mike, and then the Chief, Dustin, and Sinclair's turn.”

She cocked her head to the side, then quickly glanced between the two boys, then nodded.

Steve watched as she walked across the room and left him one of the cups on the counter for him, and then carried the rest out to the living room.

“Lemonade or fruit punch Harrington?”

Steve’s gaze darted to Billy, who had stepped closer with both pitchers in his hands, gesturing with both to make his choice.

“Lemonade. Uh, please. Thanks.”

“For what it’s worth, again, I am genuinely sorry for the last time we were in this kitchen. It was a rough night all around apparently and I chose to take it out on you and your little merry band of misfits.”

Steve could only stare as Billy poured the lemonade into his designated cup. He didn’t know what to say, or rather he couldn’t open his mouth because he wasn’t sure what words were going to come out--it’s okay? I’m your partner in Mrs. Johnson’s class? Why are you such an asshole in real life but so fascinating on paper? Why are you the person that understands me? But he just nodded stupidly and fiddled with the spoon in his hand.

“Nice chat, Harrington.”

Steve waved. He fucking waved.

He felt so stupid.

-X-X-X-X-X-

Thursday afternoon Steve found a letter on his desk upon arriving to Mrs. Johnson’s class. This was the first letter he’d be getting from Billy *knowing* it was from Billy. He’d turned in his own letter Tuesday morning. He had no idea if this was a response from Mrs. Johnson’s assignment of writing about the last time you sang out loud--were you alone? Did you sing to someone? Was someone on your mind?

He hadn’t laughed like most of the class around him had. He had to think about the last time he sang out loud--Monday.

It was after dinner, he’d volunteered to clean dishes and Max had offered to help him dry. She’d found the little radio and turned it on to whatever station it would pick up and it was only oldies, and whoever was jockeying was on an Elvis kick. They’d sang along to each song, sometimes using spoons or forks as microphones. He’d felt

happy. He'd felt carefree. He'd enjoyed it immensely, and he had the strangest feeling that Max did too. Like it was something she missed doing.

She'd said as much after they hung up the towels they'd used for drying. She smiled up at him and quickly gave him a hug; "Thanks Steve, I needed this. It's something my Mom and I did all the time, before her and Neil." He ruffled her hair to which she flipped him the bird for doing.

He didn't wait until he was out of class--he already knew who his partner was. He'd opened up the sheets of paper and tucked them into the notebook he used for notes.

SO NOW YOU KNOW THAT BIG, BAD, BILLY HARGROVE IS A GIANT NERD. NO OFFENSE, BUT EVERYONE KNOWS I'M AN ASSHOLE AND SOME PEOPLE LIKE ME REGARDLESS. I ALREADY KNEW YOU WERE GOING TO LOSE YOUR DAMN MIND UPON FIGURING OUT WHO I AM, WE'VE ALREADY HAD THIS DISCUSSION.

LOOK, IT'S BEEN A WEIRD WEEK SO FAR AND THIS ASSIGNMENT HAS BEEN THE LAST THING ON MY MIND.

I DON'T NEED TO KNOW WHO YOU ARE, NOT YET ANYWAY. I'M FINE STILL WRITING TO YOU BECAUSE YOU'RE ONE OF THE DUDES IN THIS CLASS, 'CAUSE NO OFFENSE, IF YOU WERE A CHICK, YOU'D HAVE HEARTS DOTTED ALL OVER THESE THINGS.

I DON'T LIKE TO SING IN FRONT OF PEOPLE. I MEAN, I DO, IN THE CAR AND STUFF, BUT THAT'S USUALLY JUST TO WHATEVER'S PLAYING. MY KID-SISTER, THE OTHER NIGHT, WE BOTH WENT OUTSIDE OUR COMFORT ZONES, AND HAD DINNER WITH HER GROUP OF DORKS. I HAVEN'T HEARD HER SING SINCE BEFORE WE MOVED FROM CALIFORNIA. SHE DOESN'T KNOW, NOR DOES HER MOM, THAT I'VE HEARD THEM A FEW TIMES WHILE WE WERE STILL OUT WEST.

SHE WAS WASHING DISHES WITH ONE OF THE DORKS AND THEY WERE SINGING ALONG TO ELVIS. THEY WERE REALLY

INTO IT AND OBLIVIOUS TO THE REST OF US TRYING TO BE SNEAKY AND WATCH THEM. I LIKED SEEING HER THAT CAREFREE, EVEN FOR JUST A MOMENT. I REMEMBERED SEEING A CAMERA WHEN WE GOT THERE, SO I ASKED IF THEY COULD TAKE A PICTURE. OF THE BOTH OF THEM, BUT IF THEY COULD GET HER SMILE--HER MOM WOULD LOVE IT.

I'M AN ASSHOLE, AND I TEND TO BE THE BIGGEST ONE TOWARDS HER. MOSTLY BECAUSE I HATED THAT MY DAD COULD JUST EASILY REPLACE MY MOTHER AFTER SHE DIED. AT LEAST THAT'S HOW I FELT AND THAT'S ONE OF MY BIG SECRETS. IT'S THE ONE I'M WILLING TO SHARE WITH YOU. MY MOM DIED WHEN I WAS FOURTEEN. I'D JUST FINISHED UP MY LAST YEAR OF JUNIOR HIGH, GETTING READY TO MOVE ON TO HIGH SCHOOL, AND SHE WAS TAKEN OUT BY SOME OLD LADY RUNNING A RED LIGHT.

I NEVER WANTED A SIBLING. I GOT ONE ANYWAY. I'M EXPECTED TO KEEP AN EYE ON HER, AND YET SHE RUNS OFF WITH HER LITTLE BAND OF WEIRDOS AND I GET THAT THIS TOWN IS ONLY SO BIG, BUT I DON'T WANT TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR SOMEONE ELSE'S KID. PLUS IT'S HER FAULT WE MOVED HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE. I MIGHT BE ABLE TO TELL YOU ALL ABOUT IT, IN DETAIL, IN PERSON, ONE DAY, BUT NOT NOW. I'M STARTING TO HATE HER LESS THAN I USED TO. ME BEING WHO I AM IS NOT HER FAULT FOR HER BEING HERSELF.

YOU'RE RIGHT, I SHOULDN'T CARE WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK ABOUT ME, BUT SOMETIMES, THERE ARE THINGS THAT OTHERS WILL JUDGE ME FOR REGARDLESS IF I CARE OR NOT WHAT THEIR OPINION IS. THEN THERE ARE CERTAIN PEOPLE, SPECIFIC PEOPLE, WHOSE OPINIONS MATTER TO ME. I THINK ONE DAY, YOU COULD BE ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE. NOW THAT YOU KNOW WHO I AM, YOU'RE STILL WILLING TO DO THIS, GET TO KNOW ME--COULD WE BE FRIENDS?

YOU'VE CAUGHT ME OFF GUARD KNOWING WHO I AM. I PISSED YOU OFF BEFORE YOU WROTE YOUR LETTER AND THE LIST OF PEOPLE I PISSED OFF THIS WEEK IS LONGER THAN I CARE TO ADMIT. I'M SORRY.

I'VE BEEN SAYING THAT A LOT THIS WEEK.

IT'S NOT SOMETHING I USUALLY DO. IT'S A, WELL, YOU ASKED THAT I TRY TO BE THE GUY WRITING YOU, SO THIS IS ME TRYING. I GOT TO ADMIT, IT'S HARD. I PUNCHED SOMEONE WHO WAS KIND OF A FRIEND IN THE FACE WHEN I TRIED TALKING SHIT OUT WITH THEM. HE WAS EXACTLY THE KIND OF PERSON I WAS WARNED HE WAS, BUT I HAVE THE BAD HABIT OF SOMETIMES GIVING PEOPLE THE BENEFIT OF DOUBT. NOTE--I WILL TRY NOT TO DO THAT ANYMORE.

I SAVED ADDRESSING YOUR SECRET FOR LAST BECAUSE I HAVE A LOT TO SAY ON THE MATTER OF WANTING DEATH, OR RATHER BEING VERY APATHETIC TO IT HAPPENING OR NOT.

I GET IT. I UNDERSTAND THAT FEELING. OF WELCOMING THE END OF YOUR LIFE BECAUSE IT MEANS ALL THE FUCKED UP PARTS OF IT END. ALL THE SHIT THROWN YOUR WAY, YOU NEVER HAVE TO DEAL WITH IT EVER AGAIN.

YOU WELCOME DEATH AT THE HANDS OF SOMEONE OTHER THAN YOURSELF, UNLESS YOU'VE THOUGHT ABOUT THAT TOO--TAKING MATTERS INTO YOUR OWN HANDS? I HAVE. ONCE.

NOT TOO MANY WEEKS AFTER MY MOM DIED I TRIED. MY OLD MAN STOCKED UP ON BEER--MAMA NEVER LIKED HIM DRINKING AROUND ME, SAID IT SET A BAD EXAMPLE (IF ONLY SHE KNEW ME NOW). I KNEW WHERE THEY STORED THE TYLENOL AND ON EVERY LABEL IT TELLS YOU NOT TO TAKE TOO MANY AND TO NOT MIX WITH ALCOHOL. I DID.

I WOKE UP ON THE FLOOR OF MY BEDROOM TWO DAYS LATER. MY OLD MAN DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE. I COULDN'T EVEN TRY TO KILL MYSELF SUCCESSFULLY, SO I NEVER TRIED AGAIN. I WAS A WASTE OF A PERSON WITH A DAD WHO'S SELFISH AND EXPECTS THINGS OF ME THAT I'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO GIVE HIM.

HINDSIGHT, GRIEF DOES THINGS TO PEOPLE. EVERYONE GRIEVES DIFFERENTLY. I'VE BEEN STUCK IN THE ANGER

STAGE FOR YEARS. THOSE HUMAN MONSTERS YOU TALK ABOUT, I'M PRETTY SURE THAT I'M ONE. OR I COULD BE CONSIDERED ONE TO A FEW PEOPLE.

PITY IS A FOUR-LETTER-WORD IN MY OPINION. I HATE PITY. I DON'T NEED IT AND I DON'T WANT IT. IT CAN'T BRING HER BACK. IT CAN'T FIX THINGS.

I LOOK LIKE HER TOO. I THINK THAT'S WHY THE OLD MAN CHOSE HIS NEW WIFE AND KID, NOTHING LIKE ME OR MY MOM. NATURAL GINGER IS A HARD THING TO COPY FROM A BOTTLE. MOM AND I, OUR HAIR BLEACHES FROM THE SUN, SO WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN BLONDE. I HAVE HER EYES TOO.

DO I STILL GET THE FEELINGS OF WELCOMING AN EARLY DEATH? SURE. SOMETIMES LIFE FEELS SO UNBELIEVABLY OVERWHELMING AND I'M AT THE BOTTOM OF A PIT WITH NO WAY OUT BECAUSE THE DIRT'S STARTING CAVING IN, BUT I HOLD ON FOR MY MAMA. I LIVE THE LIFE SHE ALWAYS WANTED FOR ME, OR I WILL AS SOON AS I GET OUT OF THIS SHITHOLE TOWN. I THINK I'LL ALWAYS HAVE MOMENT OR DAYS WHERE THOSE FEELINGS WILL COME, BUT WHEN THAT HAPPENS I JUST GO DAY BY DAY.

I'M FAIRLY CERTAIN YOU HAVE SO MUCH TO GIVE THIS WORLD WE LIVE IN, YOUR LIGHT DOESN'T DESERVE TO GET SNUFFED OUT SO EARLY. YOU HAVE A WAY WITH WORDS. IT'S A GIFT NOT MANY HAVE.

AND SINCE YOU KNOW WHO I AM...

xB

8. Son of a Bitch

Notes for the Chapter:

y'all are the best, you hear me, THE BEST! Thank you so much!

i might throw a billy!pov in a chapter or two...or the next one. i haven't decided yet. i need to get my head on right for when i tackle him in this fic...i don't want to fuck shit up.

Could we be friends?

Could Steve be friends with someone like Billy Hargrove? He didn't know.

He'd thought he could go on knowing that he was opening himself up to Billy, but he's been stumped since he finished reading the letter on Thursday. He has no idea how to respond. Mrs. Johnson had to ask him if things were okay Friday afternoon.

"Mr. Harrington, a moment after class, please and thank you."

Steve nodded and again, ignored the sniggers of his peers as they all packed up their belongings and left for their next class. He packed up his things and remained sitting at his desk. He didn't know what to say to her.

He watched as she gathered her own things and double checked her desk, before she looked at him.

"Talk to me Steve, what's going on? You figured out who your partner is and you told both of us that it wasn't going to be a problem, and you've yet to turn in two letters. So tell me, when was the last time you sang out loud?"

He fiddled with the strap of his backpack and looked everywhere around

the room before meeting her eyes.

“You read his letter to me, right?”

He waited for her nod, “I’m the other dork singing in the kitchen with his sister. She and I, we needed that moment. It was nice not to have to care about anything. We had fun, something I think either of us had in a long time.”

He could tell her eyes were smiling at him, and probably the words Billy wrote in his letter.

“Are you afraid of him finding out it’s you on the other end of these letters? I’m not an antique Steve, I know kids talk and they like to do it within earshot of teachers who have perfectly functioning ears. Do you think you two could be friends? Despite your rocky introductions? What did you think or feel when you read that question, ‘Could we be friends?’”

“My, I, um, my immediate thought was no. Hell no actually, but then I thought about it and uh, maybe, one day, but not right now. Definitely not right now.”

She nodded, “Why one day later and not now? Putting a name and face to the boy who you’ve been sharing letters with is one of the end goals of this assignment, you just reached it a little earlier, as have some of your classmates. They haven’t stopped writing about their secrets just because they now know who they’re writing to, or getting letters from. You can’t tell me that all of your classmates are the best of friends already.”

“Mrs. Johnson, you remember back in the fall when my face was beat to hell? That was Billy Hargrove’s handiwork. He did that to me.”

“You were standing up for one of your kids.”

“That doesn’t make it okay on his end! Why would I want to be friends with someone who bullies kids, who targets the black kid?”

He could feel his anger rising and he really didn’t want to take it out on Mrs. Johnson, but she was asking some questions he didn’t want to touch right now.

“You’re right, it doesn’t make it okay, but Billy’s not only the boy who

beat your face, or picks on his sister's friends. He's also the boy who lost a mother and hasn't fully grieved that loss. He's also the boy who chose to leave a party early because he felt the desire to write to you, not even knowing who you are. He's the boy who knows he's an asshole, your words and his, and is trying to be different because you suggested it.

"Steve, you have absent, near negligent parents, which is a whole can of worms in itself, but and I'm not choosing sides so don't go that route, losing a parent is not the same, it's something that's not easily processed, no matter how old you are. However, it is more tangible and all encompassing when you are young, still growing and figuring out who you are as a person. You are denied moments of clarity, or safety, of love and security that are necessary for your growth and development."

He looked at her, "How old were you when you lost a parent?"

She gave him a sad smile, "I was eight months old when my father died, he was in the war. A lot of my friends grew up without fathers in the forties. I gained a step-father when I was thirteen. He was a good man. A kind man. He was too young to be drafted and the only child of his single mother, so he didn't sign up when he was old enough. He passed away four years ago. My mother died when I was twenty-four."

Steve pressed his lips into a thin line and averted his gaze--what did he say to that? What could he say to that?

"There's two sides to every story. We know your side of things the night in the fall that seems to be the catalyst for this animosity between the two of you. Ask him about his side of things. If his explanation of things doesn't help, and makes things worse, I'll wrap up the assignment early. I can always blame it on teacher brain near the end of the school year."

He snapped his eyes back to hers, "You'd do that for me?"

She smiled, a genuine one, "Steve, I've told you all year, you have so much to offer, just because your brain works differently doesn't mean you're stupid and worthless. It doesn't mean your story isn't worth telling. Now, the question I assigned yesterday, what have you only recently formed an opinion on?"

Steve felt his ears burn and knew they were turning red, just like he felt his

cheeks filling with color too, "I uh, I'm still developing this opinion, and it's personal, and I'm not sure how it'll be taken."

"Mind if I sit here?"

"Fuck!" Steve hated that people kept startling him. He glanced up and saw Jonathan standing over him.

"Sorry, uh, your house was open and then I heard the radio out here."

"Why are you here? Did I forget the kids?"

Jonathan smiled, "No man, you're good. I uh, I actually came by to talk to you actually. About uh, Will."

Steve felt his insides freeze but offered what he hoped was a smile--it felt like a grimace.

"He didn't mean to, but he uh, talked with me last night and shared some things with me. I just, um, I want to thank you for being there for him and letting him know that how he feels is okay. That, that there's nothing wrong with him."

Steve sat up abruptly and looked at Jonathan, he knew he couldn't hide the fear, shame, and whatever else he was feeling in his eyes.

Johnathan put his hands up, "Hey, calm down, take a deep breath. I haven't said anything to anyone. He felt really bad about saying anything to me, especially when he dropped your name."

"I uh, Will's a good kid. He uh, he's very smart too."

"Steve, it's okay if, if you're like Will too. You know that right?"

"I'm still trying to wrap my head around a lot of things, and this is a conversation that I never wanted to have with you of all people."

Steve sighed and looked over at Jonathan, "Can I ask you something, and I think you owe me the truth since you just, did what you just did?"

Jonathan sat down and nodded.

“Knowing your dad’s history, and how you uh, behave sometimes, do you uh, do you think that Mr. Hargrove is like your dad?”

Steve didn’t miss the small flinch in Jonathan’s posture, or that the other boy took in a sharp breath. He waited though, he allowed him to compose himself.

“I’m pretty sure that Mr. Hargrove is similar to my old man. When you go through something like that, you learn to see it in others who experience it too. Am I going to get the shit beat out of me by Billy for even suggesting we talk about our shitty dads, not a chance. I get why he is the way he is though.”

Steve scoffed, “You’re the third person to tell me that about him, that you get why he is the way he is. It doesn’t negate that he does what he does! You’re not a bully and your dad’s a piece of shit human being! My dad’s an asshole and I’m not an asshole!”

“Can I ask you something?”

Steve nodded.

“He’s your partner for your English class isn’t he?”

Steve narrowed his eyes but nodded in affirmation.

“I think he knows it’s you. You hadn’t folded up your letter when he approached us and I noticed him flinch when he glanced down in your lap.”

“He hasn’t said anything about knowing who I am. He said he’s okay *not* knowing yet.”

“I’m just telling you what I *saw* , and I’d think a smart guy like him, he’d recognize his own handwriting.”

Steve swallowed, “Uh, what, what did you say to Will when he told you about his feelings?”

“I told him that I knew already. He looks at Mike the way Mike looks

at El. She knows and she adores Will even more. They share love for the same person. Mike might be an asshole to everyone else, but when it comes to Will and El, we know he'd do anything. I mean, Nancy told me the kid lied to the government when they came looking for her.

"Steve, I told him it doesn't change the fact that he's my brother and I love him no less for it. So I won't get a sister when he grows up, I'll get another brother, who cares. He's going to tell Mom today, which is why I left. Give him some privacy. She's probably going to react the same way I did, and tell him that she already knows. She'll still gush about wanting grandbabies one day, when he's older."

"Your mom's a good mom."

Jonathan smiled, "She is. She tries. She's not perfect, but she is a good mom."

"She told me it was okay, on Monday. If I liked boys, or just girls, or both. I needed to hear that from someone who actually gives a damn about me."

Steve felt Jonathan put a hand on his shoulder and give it a squeeze, much like Joyce did on Monday, "You're still you Steve, who you love isn't going to change that. I know we're not like best friends forever, but I'm here for you, if you ever need a friend."

"Thanks."

"I really did want to say thank you, for talking things through with Will. You helped him feel more comfortable in his own skin."

He could only nod and watch as Jonathan got to his feet. They shared an awkward wave as Jonathan disappeared around the side of the house.

Steve flopped back down onto the lounge he was on.

What is happening? What is his life right now?

He still hadn't read the second letter from Billy, the one answering the question about a newly formed opinion.

How was he supposed to write to the one person who was the source of his own newly formed opinion--sort of. Not that Steve felt anything but animosity towards Billy, but well, no, he didn't know what he felt towards Billy. That was the problem.

Steve knew that the reason Will felt so comfortable in his own skin was because he now knew that he wasn't the only boy in Hawkins that liked boys too. He wasn't alone in feeling like he was the only one. Not like Steve has. Not like Steve has been denying since he figured out the truth about Uncle Rodney and Uncle John's relationship. Maybe, if his mom ever took him with her, he could convince Joyce to let Will come too. See a whole community of people who were just like them--well, mostly. Steve knew now that he had no preference to boys or girls, he liked both. He could and can admit that to himself now--but could he admit it to someone else?

He knows that he kind of just did to Jonathan, but he wasn't sure if he was ready for other people to actually know.

He got up and stretched and then went back into the house and dug through his backpack he'd tossed on the couch yesterday.

He stared down at the envelope with his name on it.

He sat down on the couch and opened it up.

A RECENT OPINION I'VE GAINED IS THAT SMALL TOWNS SUCK. I MEAN I LIVED IN A SMALL CITY OUT IN CALIFORNIA, BUT THE POPULATION WAS THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE, NOT THE HUNDREDS HERE IN HAWKINS.

EVERYONE KNOWS EVERYONE. AND THEY'RE SO FUCKING NOSY IT DRIVES ME CRAZY.

DID YOU KNOW THE GIRLS HERE THINK I'M SOME SAINT VIRGIN BOY SAVING MYSELF FOR MARRIAGE? HAHHAHAHAHA! (SORRY MRS. JOHNSON!)

I'M NO VIRGIN, NOT EVEN CLOSE. I'M JUST VERY PARTICULAR ABOUT WHO I SHARE MYSELF WITH.

WHICH REMINDS ME, SMALL TOWN MEANS AT SOME POINT

EVERYONE SHARES EVERYONE ELSE'S EXES, RIGHT? WHAT IS THE DEAL WITH HARRINGTON, BYERS, AND WHEELER? ARE THEY A THING?

WHEELER TOLD ME THEY ARE AND THAT HARRINGTON DESERVES EVERY GOOD THING EVER SAID ABOUT HIS BEDROOM SKILLS (AGAIN, SORRY MRS. JOHNSON!!). I MEAN, I GET HOW THREESOMES WORK. WHEN EVERYONE PARTICIPATES IT CAN BE QUITE A GOOD TIME (SO SORRY MRS. JOHNSON!).

DO YOU PEOPLE JUST RECYCLE FRIENDSHIPS? TAKE BREAKS AND COME BACK TO EACH OTHER?

I DON'T GET IT. I DON'T THINK I WANT TO UNDERSTAND SMALL TOWNS. I PLAN TO GET OUT AT MY EARLIEST CONVENIENCE.

I'VE NOTICED YOU HAVEN'T RESPONDED SINCE YOU TOLD ME YOU FIGURED OUT IT'S ME. DO YOU REALLY THINK THAT POORLY OF ME OUTSIDE OF THESE LETTERS THAT I CAN'T EVEN WARRANT ASSOCIATION BY ASSIGNMENT?

xB

Steve felt like an asshole.

He treated Billy poorly on Monday at the Byers' house. He'd tried talking to him even, and Steve just kept shutting him down.

BILLY,

I'M SO SORRY FOR HOW I HAVE TREATED YOU SINCE FIGURING OUT THAT YOU'RE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THESE LETTERS. IT WAS NOT MY INTENTION TO IGNORE YOU, MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE SHIT, SO I'M SORRY.

THE DEAL WITH HARRINGTON, BYERS, AND WHEELER IS THAT THEY'RE FRIENDS. HARRINGTON'S THE THIRD WHEEL, BUT NOT A PART OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BYERS AND WHEELER.

IT'S THE CURSE OF SMALL TOWN LIFE. I'VE BEEN THROUGH A LOT OF FRIENDS GROWING UP. IT HAPPENS. IT'S NOT DIFFERENT FROM ANYWHERE ELSE.

YOU GOING BACK TO CALIFORNIA? I'VE ONLY BEEN TO THE MOUNTAINS UP NORTH. MY DAD LIKES TO SKI.

AS FOR A NEWLY FORMED OPINION ON MY END, A FRIEND OF MINE TOLD ME THAT THEY DON'T LIKE GIRLS. I HAD TO TAKE A BREATH BEFORE I TOLD HIM IT'S OKAY.

BECAUSE IT IS OKAY.

SPEAKING OF HARRINGTON, WHAT WAS THE DEAL WITH YOU AND HIM BACK NEAR HALLOWEEN? WERE YOU THE ONE THAT DID THAT TO HIS FACE? HE'S REALLY LUCKY THERE WASN'T ANY PERMANENT DAMAGE DONE. WHOEVER DID THAT, IT WAS VERY PERSONAL.

THANK YOU FOR TELLING ME ABOUT YOUR MOM, AND THE AFTERMATH OF HER DEATH IN YOUR LIFE.

CAN I ASK YOU A VERY PERSONAL QUESTION? WELL, I'M GOING TO ASK IT ANYWAY, YOU CAN CHOOSE TO ANSWER OR NOT. DO YOU LIKE GIRLS THEN? OR DO YOU PREFER BOYS? OR IS IT MORE THE PERSON YOU'RE INTERESTED IN, LIKE THE PACKAGING DOESN'T MATTER? I'M ONLY ASKING BECAUSE YOU MENTIONED THREESOMES--HAVE YOU BEEN IN ONE BEFORE? WHAT WAS IT

I HAVE TO CUT THIS SHORT, SORRY.

The phone ringing cut Steve's writing off.

"Harrington residence, Steve speaking."

"Hi sweetie."

Steve didn't like the tone of her voice.

"Hi Ma. How's your trip?"

“Your father’s on his way home. I’m staying here for a little while longer.”

“Is everything okay?”

“How do I say this politely--”

He heard John’s voice in the background but couldn’t make out what he was saying.

“Ma, come on, what’s going on?”

“Your father knocked up his secretary at the office. You’re getting a half-sibling in six months.”

Steve was glad he was already sitting down.

“He’s going to the house to pack his belongings. He’s admitted to his mistake, and will make sure the house is there for our use. If you want him to visit you, I have a number for you to call him at. He is not to touch anything but his *clothes* and his *study*, do I make myself clear?”

Steve choked on his spit, “Uh, um, yes. How are you?”

Her fake laugh told him everything her words weren’t going to, “Oh sweetie, don’t worry about me! I knew what your father was before we got married. This isn’t his first bout of infidelity sweetheart. I’ll be home for your graduation, is that something you want him to attend?”

Okay, she was compartmentalizing.

“Can I uh, can I get back to you?”

He didn’t wait for her answer and just hung the phone up. She’d get over it.

He tossed his school things to the floor and got up and went to the liquor cabinet and pulled out whatever was sitting in the front. He took a swig and allowed himself to focus only on the burn as it went down his esophagus.

Was his dad going to go live with his secretary? And gross, she was only like six years older than Steve! Maybe she did it to try and get some of the money his dad has. They are the wealthiest family in town. Both his parents are successful at what they do. He's never had to want for anything--just their time and affection, but he's managed thus far.

A fucking baby? What was his dad going to do with a baby?

He took another swig.

He didn't want to be alone, but he didn't know who he could go to. Or who he could talk to about this.

How did you tell someone that your mom was kicking your dad out because he's a cheating whore? Did that mean he had to choose holidays to spend with them? Would his dad even want to spend time with him now? Or would he choose to try again, do better with this new baby?

Sometimes he hated his mom and her lack of filter when it came to talking to Steve about life. She didn't believe in coddling though so he did appreciate not being sheltered.

He took three more large gulps of the bottle and capped it and put it back. He felt warm, so he knew he'd had enough of whatever he'd grabbed.

He picked up his letter to Billy--maybe he'd ask him what to do. He got Max and didn't even want her. Not at first. He did think it was nice of Billy to bring her to Monday's activities, so maybe he was warming up to her? He knows he's mentioned a few times in his letters that he still hates her for causing them to move here, but what could cause someone to come nearly across the country?

His mom was sending his dad back across state lines because he knocked his secretary up. She was kicking him out of their house for it too.

Son of a bitch. That meant he'd have to deal with the old man. Maybe he'd show up and leave when he was at school, nope,

tomorrow's Sunday.

The phone ringing caught his attention again.

"Hello?"

"Hey big guy, how are you? I got your mom to sleep. That was a doozy huh?"

"Uncle John, what the fuck is going on? Is dad really on his way home to pack up and leave?"

Steve slumped back onto the couch.

"Kiddo, you know that adults can make stupid decisions."

"He cheated on Ma, John! Am I going to have to interact with this baby?"

Steve didn't know anything about babies!

"Big guy, I'm going to need you to calm down. I told your mom that this was a face-to-face conversation, but you know how she is. I can be out there in a few hours if you need me to come and talk to you?"

"You just want to come and beat the shit out the old man."

"I mean, that's not *only* why I'd come out there kiddo. I can always send Rodney."

Steve felt himself smiling.

"Uncle Rodney would have dad blowing his brains out by stating all of the statistics he knows about divorces due to adultery, and bastard children, and whatever else he could come up with."

"I got you to smile and laugh a little, I heard it! For real though, I can catch the next flight to Indianapolis and be to you in hours."

Steve knew that he didn't want to be alone, let alone with his dad coming home under the circumstances he was coming home under.

"Only if Uncle Rodney and Mom don't come with you. No offense but

I don't think I could handle either of them right now. I'm not even sure how I'm going to handle Dad coming home."

"As soon as I hang up I'll pack a bag and I'll be on my way. I'll call as soon as I land."

"Thanks Uncle John."

"You know we'd do anything for you kiddo."

"Be safe."

"See you soon big guy."

Steve hung up the phone.

There was no way he was getting any sleep tonight.

9. You're a Horrible Liar

Notes for the Chapter:

y'all, lemmie just say, y'all give me life, mmkay?! i'm so glad that y'all really like this fic and i'm really enjoying writing it.

again, writing on google docs so formatting doesn't always flow when i copy and paste...so, uh, apologies if i missed some mishaps!

It was 2:48am when he heard his dad's car pull up to the house. He'd been sitting on the couch the whole time.

Uncle John hadn't called yet, but he should be soon.

He simply stared at his dad.

“Your mother call?”

Steve nodded, and watched his dad cross to the open liquor cabinet. He didn't say anything about it being open already.

“I'm filing a paternity test first thing Monday morning. If it's mine, we, uh, *I'll* deal with it. If she's lying, I'll charge her with slander.”

“Dad, she's pregnant, you can't take everything away from her.”

Steve watched as his old man took four deep swallows of his drink.

“I don't have it in me to do this again.”

He'd gestured between the two of them.

“No offense Dad, but if it is your kid, treat it a hell of a lot better than you ever did with me.”

“Steve, *Stevie* , I only wanted what was best for you. I got so lost in working to provide you with nothing but the best that I left you behind.”

“I don't want or need an apology from you.”

“I don't even think that I know who you are. I *am* allowed to be sorry about that. You know, I actually had the thought, while on the plane, if it is my kid, I can just pay her off and bring the baby here. Your mother would come around and, we'd get a second chance to raise a child.”

“You can stop talking.”

Steve started to gather his school things. He was not going to sit here and listen to his dad's guilt.

“Look, Turkey, oh, wow, it's been a while since I called you that. You're all we talk about when we travel. When shop talk is over, we go on about your basketball games, your track record, and I just realized that we , *I*, have never said anything about your accomplishments to your face.”

The phone rang.

“Harrington resid--John? The hell are you calling so late? Of course he's here! Where else would he be?”

Steve felt relieved that John was on his way.

“Dad, tell him we'll see him soon.”

“You're here!? See you soon.”

Steve took his letters and headed towards the stairs. Maybe he'll give Billy two letters.

He was halfway up the stairs when he turned to look down at his dad, “Ma says you only take your clothes and what you *need* from your study. Nothing else. I'm on pretty good terms with the police chief, I can call him up to supervise you if you're going to be an asshole about this.”

“So you're choosing your mother.”

Steve felt so much anger, he felt like he was vibrating with it.

He threw his backpack on the floor.

“I'm choosing *me* . I've only *ever* chosen me because *neither* of you are ever around! You're the one that knocked up some lady, *who is not your wife* , and you have the audacity to say anything to me about being my dad!”

“Watch your tone with me boy!”

“Or what? You going to hit me? Toss me out? You're right about one thing, you *don't* know me. I'm not afraid of you.”

Steve watched as his old man deflated and sat down on the couch. He hung his head in his hands.

“Turkey, I *know* that you are a better person than I will ever be. I'm sorry. I know you don't want to hear that, *but I am* .”

Steve didn't say anything else. He turned away and continued to his room. He made sure to slam his door.

He just wanted to go back to Billy Hargrove being his biggest dilemma. Not *this* , whatever this is. He did not want this to be his normal.

Steve woke up with paper stuck to his cheek. He glanced around his room and realized that he'd fallen asleep. Last night, or early this morning, he recalled everything.

He bolted to his feet and raced downstairs.

He froze in the entryway of the kitchen, John was leaning against the counter holding a cup of coffee. He put it down the moment he noticed Steve.

“Hey big guy.”

Steve rushed forward and crashed into his chest. He felt John's arms

wrap around him and he let everything out.

All of his stress, his anger, his confusion, every little thing he has felt, he finally let it out.

“I need you to listen and then I promise you, *I promise* , you can go back to bed or do whatever you want to today, but I do need you to listen to me, you good?”

Steve didn't pull away but he did take a few breaths to calm himself down. He nodded against John's chest.

“The old man is still upstairs. He and I exchanged words when I got in. He slept in his study. I did check in on you but you were out so I let you sleep. I can stay here with you until graduation and then we can go back to my house afterwards, or I can stay for as long as you want me to, but know that we'll be here for your graduation. Think about it. I don't want an answer today.”

Steve nodded and pulled himself back, but not completely out of the hug.

“Uncle John, you, you don't have to stay. I'm, I'm pretty used to being on my own.”

John pulled away and made sure to look Steve in the eye, “I really hate that that's something that you say, and *mean* it.”

The doorbell ringing threw both of their attention. Steve looked at the time, it was 11:33am.

“Company?”

Steve sighed, “You know my kids, I completely forgot that we designated my house for their game today.”

“Shall I get the door? Make extra pancakes? What do you want me to do here?”

“Pancakes sound awesome, and uh, tell dad to stay scarce.”

“Can do, kiddo.”

Steve headed towards the door as John headed upstairs.

He opened the door and took in all the looks he was getting.

“You told us your parents were out of town until graduation.”

“Mike, it’s been a shitty night, can you just not be your charming self right now?”

“Hey buddy, who uh, why are there two extra cars in your driveway?”

Steve looked at Dustin, “My dad came home early, and my Uncle John’s here.”

“The gay one?”

Steve nodded to Lucas who then grinned. He did not like the look of that smile.

“Steve, let your children in.”

Steve rolled his eyes; he hadn’t even heard John come back down. It was going to be a long day. He stepped back and watched as the guys came in and greeted John.

The sound of a very familiar engine approached and Steve didn’t even want to think about what else could go wrong because, well, now’s he’s already fucked himself over just thinking it.

Of course, why wouldn’t Billy fucking Hargrove show up, even if to drop Max off, when Steve didn’t need anything remotely dealing with him.

“Hold on, is that a Camaro?”

“Uh, Uncle John, the kid who drives that death trap tried to murder us, mostly Steve. We like his sister so much better, but she could kick all of our asses and not even break a sweat.”

John smiled, “You must be Dustin! I have a cherry red, with two black racing stripes, 1961 Chevelle SS. I also have my own shop that

keeps my pretty little house afloat. I know, looking at me, especially at work, you wouldn't think I'm gay, but here we are. I need to go say hello to that beautiful piece of machinery!"

He was out the door before anyone else could say anything else.

Dustin sidled up to Steve, "Do you think Billy will just know that your uncle's a homosexual? Do you think he's the kind of guy that would beat someone up for being gay? I mean he tried to beat up Lucas for being black, so I wouldn't put it past him."

Steve noticed Max climb out and slam the door shut and cross through the yard. She gave her half smile, half smirk to John as they passed each other.

"Who's that guy?"

"Steve's gay uncle John."

Max spun back around and stared at John, who was now talking to a Billy who got out of the car.

"I can see it. He's the butch of the pair isn't he?"

Steve couldn't help but laugh a little, "Uh, no. I, I uh, don't know. I think they're both pretty even with each other. Rodney's dramatic but he's not flamboyant. Neither of them are."

"What does he do? He was already yelling questions about the motor before he said a quick hello as he passed me."

"He owns a mechanic shop on the island he lives on. Keeps him busy. He's always been about cars though. Mom doesn't know how Rodney ever got his interest because Rodney is whatever it is to be illiterate about cars."

Max looked at him then back across the yard, "Oh great, remind me *why* we had to be nice and start including Billy?"

Sure enough, Billy was walking side by side with John, heading back towards the house. Though Steve doesn't ever recall seeing Billy talking so animatedly about anything. Ever.

“Hi, I’m Uncle John, I apologize for being so rude, but when you see a thing of beauty you just have to get your hands on it and know everything about it. You must be Max, and I am going to talk your brother’s ear off while I make an unhealthy amount of pancakes. You kids have fun.”

And they were off. Steve didn’t look at either his uncle or Billy when they came in.

Would Billy write about this in a letter?

Why was he even thinking about that? Steve stole a quick glance into the living room at the liquor cabinet, was noon too early?

“Huh.”

Steve looked at Dustin who was glancing between Steve and the direction of the kitchen.

“What?”

Dustin’s cheeks tinged pink and he shrugged, “Nothing. I, uh, science! Yeah, I was thinking about science. One of my projects. You know me.”

“You know you’re a horrible liar, right?”

Dustin just turned and walked away, heading towards the dining room where they set up their game.

Steve knew they were just waiting on El to show--maybe he should just run the situation by Hopper. He might not leave, and then *he’d* have to explain to the kids what happened, and he really just wanted to go back to bed at this point. Try again tomorrow.

“Hey big guy, you want blueberries or chocolate chips in any of your pancakes?”

He felt his whole body flush with shame--he knew John was doing this on purpose.

He heard the kids yell out chocolate chips so he remained silent on the matter.

What did it matter now that the kids have met his Uncle John, and thought that John would at least like the kids, but instead he's gushing over Billy Hargrove's car--in his kitchen of all places!

Steve needed a vacation. He stepped out the front door and sat on the steps to wait for Hop and El.

He didn't want to think about anything for a minute.

He wondered if John knew if there was a term for people who didn't mind both boys and girls. Steve's never kissed a boy before, but he knows the thought doesn't make him squeamish. He's quite curious about it actually.

Would he like stubble scraping along side his own? Would the lips be just as soft as his, or a girl's, or would they be chapped? Would his hands nestle just as easily on slim hips rather than rounded ones? Would nipples still like to be pinched, or bitten, or sucked? Would he like to be manhandled?

Steve shook his head--now was definitely not the time to be thinking these thoughts.

"Steve."

He jumped again, thankful he didn't yell like he had at Jonathan yesterday. He smiled up at El.

"You were projecting last night. I didn't mean to."

She looked over at Hop, who wasn't in complete uniform, but definitely had his badge visible.

"I can talk to your old man if you want?"

Steve shook his head, "Thanks, but I just want this to all be over with."

"I tried convincing the gang to come out to the cabin, but they all wanted to see you too."

The door jerked open behind them, "Steve-o, *oh* , hello *Daddy* . I'm

John, Steve's uncle. Hi sweetheart, you must be the Jane the boys and Max are waiting on! Come on in, I'll show you to where they set up shop. Steve, can you help Billy in the kitchen with plates? I put the food out back in the sun room."

El grinned and followed John into the house and Steve just stared at Hopper, whose reaction to John he couldn't quite read. If he didn't know any better, he'd say that there might be some pink going on on Hop's cheeks, but he does know better and doesn't want to go to jail for saying something stupid. So he just laughed instead.

"That's your uncle?"

"Yup. From Chicago. Lives in New York with his partner. That's where mom's been the last month and a half."

Steve noticed Hop's raised eyebrow, "Partner, as in?"

Steve nodded.

Hop nodded.

Then Steve followed Hopper into his own house. Hopper headed around like he knew where he was going, and Steve headed to the kitchen.

He took in the sight of Billy pulling plates out of one of the cabinets. Billy'd taken off his denim jacket and had some tee that he'd cut the sleeves, and a good chunk of the sides off. He didn't even want to acknowledge that his thoughts from the porch immediately came back, putting Billy's body in front of Steve, or rather his imaginative hands. Nope. He *definitely* was *not* going there.

He did smile a little at Billy's startle when he finally noticed Steve's presence.

"Christ, Harrington, warn a guy when he's holding dishes that probably cost more than his car!"

"Jokes on you dude, Ma got those at a thrift store."

"Which way do I take these? And your uncle said to grab the

silverware.”

“Give me a sec, and just follow me.”

Steve crossed the room to the drawer that held the silverware. He grabbed all the forks and all the knives in the drawer. He didn't feel like counting.

“Uh, your uncle's pretty cool. Do you share his interest in cars?”

Steve shook his head, “No, but I have his knowledge, which is why my car stays running.”

Steve just turned and started walking towards the back of the house where the sun room was.

He noticed that everyone had already found seats, even Hop, who was sitting between El and Will. He hated that the only two seats available were right next to each other, but he took the seat next to Dustin.

He definitely didn't like the little smile El made when Billy sat down beside him.

He was certain he hated the small look El shared with Dustin.

He allowed himself to look around the table. John was still talking a mile a minute about cars with Billy. Hop was chiming in every now and then. Will was talking quietly with Mike and El, but kept glancing between John and Billy. Lucas, Dustin, and Max were discussing the campaign they wanted to try next. Or at least get Mike to approve on. Apparently the kid was a harsh Dungeon Master. Whatever that meant.

Steve realized that once everyone had started eating, he could probably sneak away for a moment to himself.

He went into the house and out the sliding doors to the pool. He sat on the same chair Jonathan had startled him on yesterday.

God, was it only yesterday that his biggest concern was whether or not he was going to complete his homework?

Was his dad leaving for good? Was this the first pregnancy scare he's had with, apparently not his first bout of infidelity, as Ma had said?

He liked to think that he was a good, or at least decent, role model for the kids inside--could he be an actual decent big brother? Did he want to be a big brother?

How sober was his mom going to be when she and Rodney came here for graduation?

Was that really in six weeks?

He stared at the pool--he wondered what Barb would think of the whole Nancy and Jonathan situation. Would she have approved of Nancy's emotional betrayal? Or would she have spotted it and told her to dump him a long time before the Halloween party? Would she have told Nancy that Jonathan was too weird? What would she have thought of Billy Hargrove? Would she have ever forgiven her best friend for choosing to have sex over spending time with her? Especially the night she died?

Steve shook his head--if he could ever say anything to Barb again, he'd tell her sorry, for everything. He's pretty sure friendships like hers and Nancy's weren't easy to come by.

"So this is how the other half lives, huh?"

Steve turned to Billy, who was smoking as he walked towards Steve. He sat down on the lounge right beside him, lounging back as he took drag after drag on his cigarette.

"It's not all that it's cracked up to be."

He didn't--couldn't--make eye-contact, less Billy know what thoughts Steve had had earlier.

Billy shrugged, "Still a sight better than the other side of the tracks."

"If you say so."

"Your uncle a queer?"

Steve couldn't help but meet Billy's eyes at that, "Yes, what of it?"

Billy's eyes flashed with something Steve couldn't piece together, "Nothing, just curious is all."

"Not all gay men are flamboyant or feminine."

Billy smirked, "*I know*," then stubbed out the butt of his cigarette on the armrest of his lounge. "Can I ask you something, what's the deal with the chief's kid? She, it's like she can see through my soul or something."

Steve started to laugh--he couldn't help it. With everything going on, he's losing it with Billy asking about El.

"She's harmless."

Billy raised a brow at that and nodded like he didn't believe Steve at all.

"I'll be back for Maxine around three."

Steve watched as Billy got to his feet and headed into the house.

They could be civil with one another.

That wasn't a horrible experience.

He still wondered if Billy was going to write about any of this in one of his next letters.

10. Who's William?

Summary for the Chapter:

A small glimpse into Billy's perspective.

Notes for the Chapter:

um...i tried y'all...i tried...

HAVE YOU EVER SEEN SOMEONE FROM ACROSS THE STREET, OR THE ROOM, OR JUST ACROSS SOME KIND OF SPACE FULL OF PEOPLE, BUT YOU CAN ONLY SEE THEM, HAVE YOU EVER MET YOUR SOULMATE? YOU JUST KNOW THAT THIS IS YOUR PERSON, THE ONE WHO WAS MADE JUST FOR YOU?

I think I have, Billy thought to himself. He crumpled up the sheet of paper. He knew the moment Tommy had pointed out Steve Harrington, who was dressed like a douchebag he might add, at that Halloween party, he was going to be in trouble.

Billy *hated* him on sight. He'd been resigned to the thought that he would have zero interest in *anyone* who lived in the shitty little town they had moved to, but of course, here was proof that karma was a crafty bitch.

The new version of the Hargrove family had just uprooted from their home, to the smallest town Billy had ever been to. All because Maxine and he hated the *idea* of each other. They hated having a sibling thrust into their lives that they did everything in their powers to make each other's lives miserable. They did have a mutual agreement that they were having a lot of fun trying to one up the other.

Max took the championship though. Billy still doesn't know if he will ever get over what she did.

He knows, *he knows* , in hindsight now, that she was only acting out as they had been doing. The beating he took the next day, when Susan and Max were *gifted* a shopping day for things to be delivered to their new *home* , was a little bit taxing.

Neil Hargrove was never a kind man. A good one? Billy knows that the man has his moments, but they are never directed at him. He has no idea what his mother saw, or Susan for that matter, sees in Neil.

The day after the dinner that screwed up their lives, Billy had two broken ribs, and he peed with a tinge of red for a day and a half. No hospital. They weren't going to start over with that hanging over their heads. Not when they had Max's words-- "*I saw Billy on his knees in the parking lot at the arcade. He was with the older Lawrence boy.*"

Billy stared out at the quarry. He could feel the anger and frustration reaching his boiling point, but he was exhausted.

Hawkins, Indiana really puts things in perspective. At least it did for Billy. Small town in the middle of nowhere, there was not a damn thing to do.

And yet, even keeping his head down, at home, and making sure that his grades were high, Neil was never going to see Billy as being good enough. Not when all he thought about when he looked at him was *I saw Billy on his knees*.

Faggot was his favorite word for Billy. He said it in such a tone that left no doubt in anyone's mind, just what he thinks of his own son.

The night Max snuck out, he remembers how much rage he felt. How he practically could not function because of it.

How he hated the fact that Max could be seen in public with the Sinclair kid. She'll get some shit because she's dating a black boy, but the saving grace is the word *boy* . Billy knows that he might never get the chance to show off his own *boy* .

He hadn't started his car yet. He was contemplating just sitting outside the Harrington residence, knowing that he's not welcome inside, and wait for Max. No matter how nice to him Jane was the

other night, or over the late breakfast they just had, Billy would never be welcome in that little group of misfits, and a small part of him might be a little disappointed.

John was everything a thirteen year old Billy wanted. The man was a *wet dream*. He was tall, lithe, but defined by muscle and strength. And Billy knows that he's always had a type--tall, brunette, and a beautiful smile. Now, at seventeen, he was still a wet dream, but Billy looked up to John. He was shocked to find out where he lived, and that he talked about it so openly. A community like that sounded nice. He hadn't been able to properly talk cars with anyone outside old man Jones who had the only auto shop within ten miles of Hawkins.

Billy hopes that one day he can be that open about himself. He didn't think it would be fair to whomever he shared his life with, if he still hid in the closet. He knew that's why Neil chose the middle of nowhere. He probably had Susan throw a dart at the map and Hawkins, Indiana is where it landed. He'd known, even still back out west, some people still shit on others for who they loved, but he couldn't handle small-town mindsets. However, he's been surprised that none of the girls his age have put two and two together. He has a deep inkling that the Byers mother knows. He doesn't know what to do with that. He'd just always known that he didn't like girls the way everyone else talked about liking them. He appreciated their beauty--they can create life, they have an innate ability to be kind, and they're some of the strongest people he's ever met. But he could never imagine growing old with a little old biddie by his side. He'd rather grow old and die alone than string someone along on a farce that would cause her to hate him.

He glanced down at his watch and sighed, he just has to get through the next two hours. Then he'd be back for Max, home just in time for Susan to put whatever burnt dish she attempted for dinner this time around, and he could sit in his room. It was Sunday, and Neil watched whatever Sunday evening programs Susan wanted. Max always did homework, which was code for reading whatever books she managed to sneak in because Billy knows for certain that her homework is always done Friday evenings so she has more time to do whatever she wants over the weekend.

He dug in his pockets for his smokes and lighter--he needed

something to help calm his current state. He could've easily told Harrington earlier that he was sorry. That it was him Billy was writing to. The he too felt understood on a level that nobody else could get.

His thoughts turned to the other day at school. He'd rounded that corner and saw the three of them sitting there, *happy* , and saw Harrington reading a letter in his lap. It was the smile that had him approaching them. He wanted to know who was making him smile like that--like he genuinely liked what he was reading.

Billy knew it was irrational to be jealous over someone in his stupid class, because he recognized Mrs. Johnson's handwriting on the envelope that sat on the ground beside him.

Then he noticed his own handwriting and had to take a moment but when he glanced around he noticed Byers was watching him. He wanted to hit something. He wanted to yell at Byers and tell him that *this* was none of his business. Mostly though, he wanted to tell Steve Harrington that *he* wrote that letter.

He'd wanted to tell Steve Harrington that it was him when he read the letter telling him that Harrington knows it's him.

But he *can't* . And that makes him frustrated with himself. The guy already knows he's writing to Billy, but he did struggle when he figured it out. Billy will never admit to anyone how much it hurt to not receive two letters because of how he's perceived outside of the letters. *He* knows that he's been writing to Harrington and still completed his assignments.

He knows that he's always expressed himself better writing things down rather than speaking aloud.

He knows that he's an asshole. He has his reasons why, but he also knows that he's not ready to deal with those reasons.

He keeps going back to helping John in the kitchen. He'd never really had help, at least not after his mom died, and until Susan and Max moved in. Neil never complained about his cooking until there was a woman in the house again. Told him every time he tried that he

didn't belong in a kitchen.

He remembers asking Susan, one of the earliest nights after she and Max moved in, if he could help her with dinner. She'd smiled, she did that a lot then, and started asking him to chop this, wash that. She talked with him. It's probably his best memory with her. His mind immediately goes to the night Max snuck out and how she *just stood there* . He could see her flinch at Neil's actions. He could *see* her trembling as she pressed against his door and turned her head *away* , as if not seeing it meant that she wasn't a part of it.

He punched the steering wheel.

Nobody wants him around. Not here. Maybe he could talk to his guidance counselor and ask if he could get his diploma early. Get out of here and head back west, head back *home* .

He had friends who stayed in touch; it helped that two of them had younger siblings who were friends with Max, so letters could actually get to Billy. He knows that if it were addressed to him specifically, Neil would read every single one. There are many things that Billy didn't need Neil to find out about.

Except he told Kevin about Steve. About the douchebag in sunglasses at the Halloween party. Who hung out with a group of nerdy kids and didn't care what anyone thought about him. Who was too pretty to be King Steve of the dumpy little high school in the middle of nowhere.

Kevin tells him to own up to his feelings. See if Harrington's interested. Billy keeps reminding him that Harrington is straight. Leave it to Billy to have a thing for a straight boy.

He'd definitely have to ask Kev if he's ever heard about the place John lives. Maybe he'd check it out one day. He knows of the communities back home, but he's never really heard of any outside of lower New York City, some village or something.

He got out of the car and started pacing around it.

He's no different than a girl with a crush. He knows how they act,

and he hates that he acts just like one of them. His insides go all fluttery, and he doesn't know how to talk to him, and if he tries to, he looks like an idiot. Or he puts his foot in his mouth.

He flicks the cigarette to the ground and steps on it, making sure it's out. He does not want to burn the whole damn town down. Figuratively, definitely, but not in actuality.

He goes back in the car and grabs his notebook. He can do this. He can tell Steve Harrington everything.

He shuts the door and slides to the ground.

I KNOW WHO YOU ARE TOO. I'VE KNOWN FOR A WHILE NOW.

YOU TELL ME YOUR FEARS--YOU HAVE NIGHTMARES, YOU'RE AFRAID OF SOMETHING HAPPENING TO THOSE KIDS, YOUR DAD'S AN ASSHOLE, AND YOU HAVE NO PLAN FOR A FUTURE. YOU TELL ME SO MUCH ABOUT YOURSELF, WITHOUT ACTUALLY TELLING ME ANYTHING.

I THINK YOU WERE FISHING A FEW LETTERS BACK, ABOUT MY OPINION ON YOUR LITTLE FRIEND WHO TOLD YOU HE'S GAY. YOU WANT TO KNOW MY THOUGHTS ON THE MATTER. I THINK THAT SOMETIMES PEOPLE JUST CLICK WITH SOMEONE, REGARDLESS OF THE PACKAGING THEY COME IN. LOVE IS LOVE AND IT SHOULD NOT MATTER WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE (UNLESS YOU'RE ONE OF THOSE PEDOPHILES, THEN YOU CAN DIE A PAINFUL DEATH).

I DON'T HAVE ANY THOUGHTS ON THE MATTER. PEOPLE ARE WHO THEY ARE.

"YOU UNDERSTAND ME IN A WAY NOBODY ELSE EVER HAS." THOSE ARE YOUR WORDS. YOU WROTE THEM TO ME. YOU WROTE THEM TO ME WHILE YOU STILL ACTED TWO-FACED TOWARDS ME. I KNOW WHO YOU ARE AND HOW YOU REALLY FEEL ABOUT ME.

YOU TREAT ME WITH KINDNESS AND HONESTY IN THESE LETTERS, BUT IF WE'RE FACE-TO-FACE, YOU CAN'T EVEN LOOK

AT ME SOMETIMES. YOU'D RATHER IGNORE ME THAN TAKE THE ADVICE YOU GAVE ME, TO TRY A LITTLE HARDER TO BE THE PERSON WHO HAS BEEN WRITING YOU.

I ASKED YOU IF WE COULD BE FRIENDS. I DON'T THINK I WANT TO BE FRIENDS WITH SOMEONE LIKE YOU. YOU'RE ASHAMED THAT YOU STILL WANT TO WRITE ME LETTERS. YOU'D NEVER OPENLY ACKNOWLEDGE ME IN THE HALLWAY. YOU CAN HONESTLY TELL ME THAT IF I CAME UP TO YOU ONE DAY, AND SAID HELLO TO YOU, THAT YOU'D BE KIND TO ME? IN FRONT OF EVERYONE? BECAUSE I KNOW FOR A FACT THAT YOU WOULDN'T. YOU'D INSULT ME OR IGNORE ME. SORRY I ASKED YOU IF WE COULD. AT FIRST I THOUGHT YOU WERE DIFFERENT FROM EVERYONE ELSE IN THIS STUPID LITTLE TOWN. BUT NOW I KNOW THAT YOU'RE JUST LIKE EVERYBODY ELSE.

THE NIGHT I BEAT HARRINGTON'S, YOUR, FACE IN? THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE ASKING ABOUT, RIGHT?

I'D HAD WORDS WITH MY OLD MAN ABOUT RESPECT AND RESPONSIBILITY AND I USUALLY DON'T FARE TOO WELL DURING THOSE CONVERSATIONS. MY KID SISTER HAD SNUCK OUT ON MY WATCH, DESPITE HER BEING PLENTY OLD ENOUGH TO LOOK AFTER HERSELF, BUT I'D FAILED. AT LEAST ACCORDING TO THE OLD MAN. HE AND I DON'T ALWAYS SEE EYE-TO-EYE. MY ANGER WAS ALREADY ELEVATED WHEN HE SENT ME AROUND THIS SMALL TOWN TO FIND HER, AND WELL, I FOUND HER WITH SOMEONE I REALLY DIDN'T WANT TO SEE THAT NIGHT--HARRINGTON, YOU. YOU LIED TO MY FACE ABOUT HER BEING THERE. I COULD SEE HER, AND THE KIDS I'D WARNED HER TO STAY AWAY FROM, IN THE WINDOW PEEKING OUT AT US. I'D LOST IT. MY TEMPER IS NOT ALWAYS MY BEST ATTRIBUTE, AND MY RAGE BLINDED ME. THAT'S ABOUT ALL I'M WILLING TO SHARE AT THE MOMENT ABOUT THAT NIGHT.

UNLIKE YOU, KNOWING THAT YOU'RE WRITING TO ONE BILLY HARGROVE, I CAN ADMIT THAT I KNOW I'M WRITING TO ONE STEVE HARRINGTON. I'VE KNOWN FOR A WHILE ACTUALLY.

YOU LEFT A NOTE ON THE FLOOR IN THE LIBRARY A WHILE AGO. THE ONE WHERE YOU TOLD ME EXACTLY HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT ME. LIKE I SAID, WE DON'T NEED TO BE FRIENDS. THE OFFER'S BEEN RESCINDED. THAT MEANS IT'S NO LONGER ON THE TABLE.

YOU SEE, HARRINGTON, AT LEAST WHEN I'M AN ASSHOLE, I CAN OWN IT. I CAN ADMIT TO IT. YOU JUST THINK YOU CAN DO WHATEVER YOU WANT AND HAVE ZERO CONSEQUENCE FOR YOUR ACTIONS. JUST BECAUSE YOU LIVE ON THE WEALTHIER SIDE OF TOWN DOESN'T MAKE YOU BETTER THAN EVERYONE ELSE. IT DOESN'T MEAN YOU CAN TREAT PEOPLE LIKE SHIT AND IT'S OKAY.

I'M DONE THOUGH. THIS WILL BE MY LAST LETTER TO YOU. (I'LL TELL MRS. JOHNSON). I JUST CAN'T CONTINUE WORKING WITH YOU ON AN ASSIGNMENT THAT'S SUPPOSED TO OPEN ME UP TO YOU WHEN YOU THINK SO POORLY OF ME. YOUR OPINION OF ME HAS BEEN MADE CLEAR, AND I'LL RESPECT IT.

xHuman Disaster

Billy put his pencil down and stared down at his words. He hadn't meant to be that emotionally charged, but at every turn he'd tried to be civil with Steve Harrington in person, the other boy just shot him down. He was done. He'd tried.

He glanced down at his watch, he had about forty-five minutes till he was due back to pick up Max. With a sigh he closed up his notebook and got to his feet. He could do this, cut ties with the stupid boy he has a crush on--it's not like Harrington would ever think any differently about him. He hated him and he's made that point abundantly clear.

Billy would follow Max's request and leave her and the rest of her friends alone. At worst he only had one more year of school left before he could leave town.

He got in his car and headed back to Harrington's.

When he pulled up he could see a few other cars had parked in the

large driveway. He opted to stay out by the road.

He noticed movement by the side of the house, the gate to the backyard. Someone was walking towards the cars--it was Jane. She made a beeline towards him. She was smiling as she approached him. He climbed out to greet her.

“Billy.”

“Hi, Jane.”

She stared at him, that look she gave him earlier, like she was reading his entire soul in that moment.

“You guys finish early?”

She tilted her head to the side, “Oh, the campaign. No. Mike and Max couldn’t agree on three points so Lucas called the game. Want to join us in the backyard? The boys are swimming.”

He shook his head, “I don’t think I’m welcome, but thank you, it’s very kind of you to be nice to me.”

She looked at him again.

“He doesn’t hate you.”

“What?”

“Steve. He doesn’t hate you.”

Billy couldn’t help but scoff at her words, “Look kiddo, Harrington and I don’t have the best track record, and he’s made it very clear that he doesn’t like me much.”

She smirked, “Much is still more than not at all.”

He couldn’t help but smile, “Alright smartass, but your other friends, my step-sister included, aren’t my biggest fans. I’m cool waiting until you guys are done.”

“Then I’ll wait with you.”

“Won’t your friends miss you?”

“You were doing homework?”

She gestured to the notebook in his front seat. He nodded.

“What subject were you working on?”

If she wanted to change subjects he’d let her; “English. It’s uh, it’s a letter to a classmate.”

She smiled, “What kind of letter?”

He sighed, she wasn’t going to let this go; “We answer questions that our teacher assigns us, or sometimes just write letters to write letters.”

“Which were you doing?”

He didn’t like the look she’d just given him, like she knew what he was going to say, but needed to hear him actually say it.

“I uh, I’m telling my partner that I respect their opinion of me, and that this is my last letter from me. They don’t like me much.”

She furrowed her brows, “How do you know?”

Billy really couldn’t believe that he was having this conversation with one of Harrington’s kids; “Because when they figured out it was me they were writing to, they didn’t complete two assignments, and whenever we interact in person, it’s never a great interaction. They don’t like me, and that’s okay.”

She tilted her head again, “But that makes you sad, why is that okay?”

“Sometimes kiddo, you can’t come back from certain actions. I did something that I can’t come back from.”

“You’re not my Papa. You should be forgiven. Or at least they should try to understand. Bad things happen and cause bad consequences, but that doesn’t make you the bad person.”

Billy smiled at her, "I appreciate the effort Janie, but I know what I did. Sometimes I am a bad person."

She stared at him and then back at the house, "You do bad things?"

"I allow my anger to dictate my reactions to situations. I've hurt a lot of people, people who I don't think will ever forgive me for the things I've done. I wouldn't if I were them."

"I've done bad things too. We are the same."

Billy hated how serious she sounded. He didn't like hearing her talk about herself like that.

"Jane, there is nothing bad about you."

"I appreciate the effort Billy, but I know what I did."

"Fair enough."

She nodded and smiled.

The sound of the front door shutting turned their attention to the house. Max was headed their way. She looked a little confused to see both Billy and El leaning casually against the car, as if they were comfortable in each other's presence.

"Hello Max."

"Hey, Jane."

"Maxine."

"William."

"Who's William?"

"It's my real name, but most people call me Billy."

"Like El and Jane."

Billy looked confused at the mention of El, but Max was nodding in affirmation.

“Exactly! Can you tell the others I’m heading home?”

Jane smiled at the two of them, “You can write to me if you still want to write letters. I can give you my address.”

“Jane, I don’t think Hop’s going to let Billy have your address.”

Billy didn’t miss the look the girls shared before Jane nodded in defeat.

“That’s not fair, Max.”

They looked at each other again. Billy had no idea how girls were able to communicate without talking sometimes.

“Still not a compromise.”

Billy looked beyond the girls, up towards the house, and noticed the door was opening and more people were coming out. Of course he should’ve recognized the extra cars as Wheeler and Byers, coming to collect their siblings.

Without thinking it through, he walked around the the passenger seat and pulled out his notebook. He pulled out the sheets he’d written on and folded them in half and headed towards the house. He ignored the siblings crossing the lawn to their cars and kept walking up to the house. He could hear the curly haired kid before he saw him, followed by Sinclair and Harrington out the front door.

The two boys side-stepped him, but Harrington hadn’t noticed, he was closing the door.

“Oh, hey, uh Hargrove.”

Billy made eye-contact before holding out the papers, shoving them into Harrington’s chest.

He watched as Harrington looked down at the papers then up to Billy, and then he unfolded them and stared down at the words. Billy watched as his eyes moved across the paper, taking in the words, and then the recognition of what he was seeing.

Billy turned and walked away before Steve looked up at him in shock.

He ignored Harrington calling out his name.

He ignored Wheeler calling out to Harrington, trying to figure out what was wrong.

He waved goodbye to Jane as she made her way to the Wheeler kid. She smiled and waved back.

He quickly climbed in and didn't even wait to see if Max was buckled in before he pulled off from the curb.

"Wha--"

"Shut up! You *don't* get to ask me anything about what I do with anybody. You don't have that right."

He noticed her flinch in his peripheral and couldn't be bothered.

"Billy."

He put his finger in her face, "You don't get to say anything to me! Not after what you did. Not after why we had to move here in the first place."

"I'm sorry."

If he wasn't listening for her to say something he wouldn't have heard her. She'd said it so quietly.

He pulled off into the edge of someone's yard and parked.

He took a few deep breaths and finally turned to look at her.

She looked ready to fight if needed.

"I know. *I know* you're sorry. It's not that easy Max, to just say sorry and think it fixes things."

She looked at him, met his gaze, "You won't even give me a chance to try and fix this! You hold it over my head like I meant for you to

get beat up. Like I meant for Neil to find out something that I thought was common knowledge. He never said anything about Kelly and Lindsay when they were over and held hands, or when they'd kiss goodbye."

Billy let out a dark laugh.

"Look shitbird, Neil doesn't give a rat's ass about what he does to me because he thinks that as his faggot son, I *deserve* what comes my way. He knows he can't do anything to anyone else's kids either. He'd give me shit for having them over, say something like them being a bad influence on you."

She wrinkled her nose, "No offense, but gay's not my thing."

He couldn't help but give a tiny smile, "I know."

"I mean it though Billy. I'm sorry. About California, and that night at the Byers'."

He nodded. He's not sure what words would come out of his mouth at the moment. He could feel some of the rage that lingers when California's brought up, or Neil in any capacity, but he also felt an underlying sense of relief.

He'd never understand why both Susan and Neil think Max is obtuse about things. She's smart, smarter than anybody gives her credit for.

He pulled off the edge of the yard he'd pulled over in and headed to the house. When they parked he glanced at his watch, they had five minutes to spare. He wondered if he'd still get shit for it.

"If he says anything, I'll tell him it was my fault. Girl talk with Jane. Mom will be so excited that I have a girl friend that Neil won't get a word in edgewise."

Billy turned the car off and looked over at her, then nodded. She nodded and they climbed out of the car and head up to the front door.

He admired her determination. He'd give her that. But he knew that Neil would just wait. He'd wait until after Susan went to bed after her

last Sunday program, and Max had been in her room for an hour or so. Then he'd go down the hall to Billy's room, the only room on the opposite side of the house from the other rooms. And then he'd have yet another conversation about Billy's respect and responsibility.

11. You Tried

Notes for the Chapter:

my laptop finally crapped out on me...thank fuck i've been writing this on googledocs because otherwise all would have been lost...phew

i got myself a little birthday present this weekend, a new laptop! my parental unit gave me a gift card with a few bucks on it and i got myself a present.

i'm so glad y'all liked billy's pov, gives me incentive to do another one...

i tried to get all the mishaps...apologies if i missed any!

Steve stared down at the papers in his hands. At very familiar handwriting. He knew that he'd been writing to and from Billy Hargrove, he just hadn't realized that Billy knew it was Steve *he'd* been writing to.

He skimmed some of the words, but noticed the very end-- *xHuman Disaster* . His insides froze. He hadn't meant those words. But he did. He knows that *now*.

He called out Billy's name but the other boy ignored him. Kept his steady pace back to the blue car sitting at the curb.

"Steve, what's wrong? What happened?"

He didn't even realize Nancy had come back and was at his side.

"I uh, I, nothing. Don't worry about it. It's uh, *shit*, Nance."

She glanced down at the papers in Steve's hands and then back

towards Billy's car, that had just pulled off.

"He figured out it's you."

He could only nod. She wasn't wrong.

"Isn't that a good thing though?"

He finally turned away from the spot where the blue Camaro vacated and met her gaze.

"He called himself something that I never agreed to call him, but I did. I did call him that name, but it was in a letter I *never* sent him."

He missed the small flinch Nancy made.

"Are you going to be okay to take the guys home? I'm sure that Jon and I can take one a piece if you're not up for it?"

Steve shook his head and folded up the letter and put it in his front pocket.

"I'm good. Just shocked is all."

She looked at him and he stared back.

"I'm good. Promise."

She gave in and turned around back towards their cars.

Steve let out a deep breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He watched as the kids all said their goodbyes and piled into the separate cars--Will and El in Jon's, Mike in Nancy's, and Lucas and Dustin into his.

"Buckle up guys. And no, we're not going to talk about what just happened so don't even ask."

"Steve, my man, my pal, my buddy, I think you *need* to talk about what just happened. Your mortal enemy just hand delivered you a letter."

Steve tightened his grip on the steering wheel and drove off. He

glanced in the rearview mirror at the boys in the backseat.

"I have a lot going on right now, Billy Hargrove is at the bottom of the list of things that I need to work on."

"You know he has a crush on you, right?"

When Lucas didn't say anything about Dustin's statement, Steve turned the radio up.

"Ignoring me is telling."

Steve turned it up some more.

Lucas was shaking his head at Dustin.

Steve made it five minutes before he turned the radio off; "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Hear me out, okay?" He didn't wait for any response, "I'm so bad at lying, you knew that when I said *huh* . Remember what John was saying about seeing a thing of beauty and you just had to be up close and personal with it or whatever, well, Billy terrifies me, so I couldn't look away from him. As John said that, Billy locked his eyes on *you* . They looked like the way Lucas looks at Max, or Mike looks at Eleven. And I did some stupid shit trying to get Max's attention before I realized that she was into Lucas. I am like eighty-three percent sure that he has a crush on you. Plus, Will said the same thing about it to me."

Steve slammed on the brakes. His knuckles turned white with how tight his grip on the steering wheel is.

"Billy Hargrove is nothing more than an asshole. He's a bully and he doesn't like me. At. All."

Steve hated the looks between Dustin and Lucas.

"We're sorry for bringing it up. I told Dustin it wasn't a good idea, but we know how he can be."

Dustin scoffed, "Excuse me for giving a shit! The guy's a psychopath!"

“Guys, I appreciate the concern, but you don't know what it's been like.”

“Steve, if you say that we *don't know the real Billy* because he's such a *different person* writing the letters, you're an idiot. And I mean that in the nicest way.”

Steve sighed and put his forehead against the steering wheel, “He knows about the Upside Down.”

Steve didn't even react to their outbursts. They started yelling over each other at him. He let them.

He really doesn't care about anything right now. Not when he finds out if he's going to be a big brother, or if he's going to any of the colleges he applied to, or that his mom is kicking his dad out of the house.

He started driving again, heading towards Dustin's house first. Which caused the boy to get louder because he presumed that Lucas would be dropped off first.

“GUYS!”

They both shut their mouths, almost in sync.

“I, I'm, I have a lot going on right now and I really don't need to be reminded about Billy Hargrove's stellar personality. That's at the bottom of my list.”

Both boys muttered an apology.

The rest of the ride to Dustin's house was silent. He said a quick goodbye and hurried to his door.

Steve hasn't really been alone with just Lucas. Lucas moves to the front seat and stares out the window after he's buckled in.

“How come we didn't see your dad?”

“I told him not to come downstairs.”

He could see Lucas turn towards him in his peripheral, but couldn't make out what kind of face he was making.

"I was surprised that we were still having a campaign at your place, your dad has never struck me as a family man."

Steve let out a small, choked off laugh, "My dad's an asshole. Plain and simple. I've had a long time to learn about the kind of man he is."

Lucas nodded, "I'm sorry I said anything. It just throws me off when I learn that not all dads are like mine. I mean, Dustin's dad, you know, and Will's father is not really role model material either. Max, neither her dad or Neil are fathers of the year. And we know El's Papa was evil."

"Don't take the time you have with your great dad for granted."

"I try not to. But uh, are you going to be okay? If we stress you out we can always ask Mrs. Wheeler if we can go back to her basement."

Steve couldn't help but smile, "I think having you guys around actually helps. You guys are a distraction, a welcomed one, so the more campaigns you guys want to have at my place, just give me a heads up and I'll make it happen."

"I'll walkie the rest of the Party and let them know. Your uncle's pretty cool. I have an aunt who's gay, she lives out in California with her girlfriend. Mom's never said anything bad about that, but she does say that Aunt Natasha has the mouth of a sailor and she better not teach any of those words to us. Her girlfriend, we call her Aunt Sharice, spoils us. When we go out to visit every other year or so, they always take my sister and I out around the city. They live in San Francisco. Have you ever been out there? It's a huge place."

Steve felt relieved, if that's the right word for how he was feeling, that he's not the only one who has a relative that's gay. Dustin does, but Dustin is *Dustin* and sometimes you have to take what he says with a grain of salt. Steve doesn't think this is one of those things, but still, *Dustin* .

“I’ve been to California, but only up north. My dad always takes my Mom and I skiing over the winter break. It’s fun. I have, not friends exactly, but kids that have gone every year the same time we’re there so we’ve grown up together in a sense. I’ve heard about Lombard Street, that really curvy one, did you go down it?”

Lucas smiled, like it was a fond memory, and Steve was grateful for it.

“Yeah. Aunt Tasha was driving and the whole time Auntie Sharice was laughing to hard that she peed herself! Erica asks to go down it every time we go out there, and of course, they take us. Last summer we drove it and mom was with us. She had a deathgrip on her seatbelt strap. Dad was at the bottom waiting for us. He took photos of us coming down in the car. He said he didn’t want to get car sick.”

Steve pulled up outside the Sinclair house and gave a small smile to Lucas, “I mean it, as long as you nerds give me a heads up, my house is open.”

Lucas nodded, “Thanks for the ride, Steve. I’ll pass the message along.”

Steve waved at Mrs. Sinclair, who was now standing in the open front door, and he waited until she’d closed the door behind her and Lucas going inside before he pulled off and headed back home.

He didn’t want to think about the papers he’d folded up and put in his back pocket.

-X-X-X-X-X-

Steve’s alarm startled him awake Monday morning. He really didn’t want to get up and face school. Not when he’d be thinking about his dad, who left with three large suitcases last night, and waiting to hear if he’s getting a baby half-brother. Or the note from Billy Hargrove.

He hadn’t meant to sort of lie to the boys last night, Billy was at the bottom of the list of things he was worried about, but it was a short list, and he really didn’t know what to make of it.

He'd searched high and low through his five notebooks he used for school and couldn't find *that* letter, the one where he'd *actually* called Billy a *human disaster*. It wasn't in any of his notebooks.

Steve immediately went through the last times someone touched any of his notebooks. He quickly sat up and rushed to get ready. He was going to *kill* Nancy.

Steve had gone back to the library, hiding out whilst listening to their current novel for English when he felt a hand touch his shoulder, he jumped and turned to see who it was, Nancy.

She smiled and waved, waiting for him to remove his headphones and acknowledge her.

He hit pause on his walkman, and pulled off the headphones, made sure to mark where he was following along in the book, "What's up Nance?"

"I'm late for meeting up with my mom, can I borrow a sheet of paper to leave a note for Jon in his locker? We're supposed to meet up with a study group, but I've got to babysit."

Steve nodded and turned his attention back to the book and pressed play.

He hadn't realized until just now that it was the same notebook that held *that* letter. Had she really tore it out and left it for Billy to find? He knows how she feels about Billy Hargrove, so he's not surprised if she did actually do it. But he cannot think for a moment, when he'd have torn that letter out and left it for someone to find.

He paused in the threshold of the kitchen, momentarily shocked at the sight of his father and uncle each making their own breakfast.

"Hey kiddo, you want some eggs? I'm making plenty."

He nodded at John, and looked over at his dad. The man looked like he hadn't slept all weekend. He probably hadn't if Steve thought about it. He didn't pity his old man, but he definitely didn't want to be in his shoes given current circumstances.

"Morning son, uh, how are you doing?"

The sudden tension in the room let everyone know nobody had expected those words to come from Mr. Harrington.

“I, uh, overwhelmed feels right. Shit’s hitting the fan all over my life apparently, and I have no idea what to do about any of it.”

Both his dad and uncle fully turned to him, giving him their full attentions.

“Uncle John, the eggs.”

“Right, uh, you know we’re here for you kiddo. You need a hooky day? I don’t think either of us would blame you.”

He glanced between them, knowing the tone John used gave his dad zero room to actually refute those words.

“I have a thing, that I have to take care of, for a project. Maybe rain check? We’ll see how today goes?”

He kept eye contact with his dad.

“Sure, Turkey. I think that’s fair. But if you change your mind, just call the house and I’ll speak to whomever I need to to allow you to leave early undisputed.”

Steve nodded and headed over to John, who was now holding out a plate of eggs. Steve picked at them, eating most of them, but he really didn’t have an appetite.

How could Nancy *do* that? He’d *told* her that she had no right to the letters, let alone Steve’s life in general. She made her choice, she had to respect the consequences.

Was he really that mean to Billy whenever he’d tried to follow Steve’s own advice? He thought back to the night at the Byers’ and didn’t think he was standoffish, but he’d tried to be *civil* to the guy who beat him unconscious, and bullied his kids. He thought to yesterday when the kids were here and John had ushered Billy in so they could talk cars, was he really that much an asshole? Billy sure seemed to think so.

Steve bid his uncle and father goodbye and headed out to his car. He wasn't grabbing the kids this morning, all their moms had called him yesterday evening to let him know that they would be riding their bikes since it was supposed to be a nice morning.

It *was* a nice morning outside.

Upon his arrival to school Steve searched the parking lot for the Wheeler's family car, and spotted it parked next to Jonathan's.

She was smiling and talking to him as if she didn't have a care in the world. As if she didn't know what she had done. Perhaps she didn't, but Steve was going to let her know.

He found a spot close enough to their cars that it wouldn't look like he'd barreled through the parking lot to confront her. Like he could be passing by and stopped to say hello, thanks for interfering with my life.

"Jonathan, may I speak to Nancy alone, for a moment?"

He liked that he startled the two of them; hating that they were lost in their own world to even notice someone approaching fast and hard.

Jonathan nodded and told Nancy he'd meet her at her locker when they were done. She waved him off and gave Steve a smile.

"Were you there when Billy read the letter you stole from my notebook?"

Her eyes widened just enough to let him know that he'd caught her off-guard. She opened her mouth but he shook his head, " *Don't* lie to me."

"Why does it matter? You were being honest. Don't tell me you guys are friends now? That'd be ridiculous."

"That's not your choice to make!"

She scoffed, "He *beat* you *unconscious* Steve! He *threatened* Lucas! On what planet do you think someone who does those kinds of things,

rationaly , is someone you should be friends with?”

Steve stepped into her personal space, glad that she backed herself up. A move that told him she was threatened.

“Were you there?”

She stared up at him, taking in the seriousness of the situation she was in. She nodded.

Steve slammed his hand down onto the roof of her car. She startled.

“Dammit Nancy, I told you, *I told you* this was *none* of your fucking business and you ruined everything. I’m going to fail this assignment because of your interference.”

She stared at him, “You, you were serious about being understood.”

It wasn’t a question, but he nodded anyway.

“I ignored two assignments when I figured it out, that it was him. I apologized and made up for it, but when he, I didn’t know he knew it was me, I’d given him some advice, and he, he *took* it. He *followed* my suggestion and I threw it back in his face like an asshole.”

“He told you yesterday it was him, that he knew it was you, didn’t he?”

Steve stepped back and shook his head and pointed at her, “You know, I, I don’t have many friends, not since dating *you* , and even *knowing* it was Billy fucking Hargrove, I thought, maybe, just maybe, I could have the kind of friendship that you had with *Barb* . That kind of thing doesn’t just happen to people though. I understood, for just a moment, how *awful* you must feel knowing you blew off your best friend for sex.

“I thought *I* ’d fucked up the one person who understood me in ways that not even my Uncle John gets me. I told him about the Upside Down, well, a little bit. I told him things I’ve never told you, even when we were dating. But lo and behold, it was *you* . *You* took something of mine that *you* should have never touched in the first place. *You* ruined an assignment for school because *you* can’t keep

out of my business. *You . You . You .*

“I am *done* Nancy Wheeler. *You* don’t get to come back from this. Fuck *you* !”

He turned away from her, ignoring her watering eyes, and walked into the school. He headed directly for Mrs. Johnson’s classroom to try and smooth things over, hoping that Billy hadn’t already been by to talk to her.

He rounded the corner and saw Mrs. Johnson standing outside of her classroom talking to a student, a student who turned out to be the other person he was going to look for--Billy Hargrove.

He took a deep breath and approached the talking pair and excused himself into their space and conversation.

Mrs. Johnson glanced between the two of them, “Good morning Mr. Harrington, Mr. Hargrove was just telling me that he wishes to be done with the assignment. Do you have anything to add?”

Billy was looking *everywhere* but towards Steve. He was staring down the hall, determined not to look in Steve’s direction. His jaw was even twitching.

“May I speak with Billy alone?”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea. Not with the track record between the two of you. I had high hopes for the two of you. You both seem liked you were opening up to each other, perhaps finding a friend in someone you’d never thought possible.

“I don’t know *what* happened this weekend, but know that I will deduct these last few weeks from your final grade. It’s only three, but that’s quite a few assignments. We will have more words after class this afternoon, am I understood?”

They both nodded, “Yes, ma’am.”

Steve knew he’d have to search Billy out later, before class--alone. Away from the watchful eyes of Mrs. Johnson. If he didn’t know any better he’d say that she was siding with Billy. What had he told her?

He sighed and walked away, making it to his homeroom seconds before the tardy bell.

He glanced up at the clock, he had ten minutes, he'd make his words count.

BILLY,

I'M NOT GOING TO START WITH I'M SORRY BECAUSE FRANKLY, YOU AREN'T GOING TO CARE AND I DON'T KNOW IF I AM SORRY FOR SOMETHING THAT I DIDN'T ACTUALLY DO.

I NEVER INTENDED FOR YOU TO READ THOSE WORDS. AND I COULD BLAME THE PERSON WHO MADE IT SO YOU FOUND THOSE WORDS,

WHO DOES THAT? TAKES THINGS THAT AREN'T THEIRS? FUCK, I CAN'T EVEN THINK STRAIGHT RIGHT NOW I'M SO ANGRY.

BUT I DID WRITE THEM. AT THE END OF THE DAY, EVEN AFTER THIS PERSON TOOK THAT PAGE FROM MY OWN NOTEBOOK, WITHOUT MY KNOWLEDGE, AND PUT IT IN A PLACE WHERE YOU WOULD FIND IT,

I WROTE THEM.

I MEANT THEM.

IN THAT MOMENT, I DID. FOR THAT, I'M SORRY.

IT WAS THE DAY YOU TRIED TO TALK TO ME OUT ON THE TRACK. THE ONE PLACE I NEEDED TO CLEAR MY HEAD, AND THERE YOU WERE. THE ONE PERSON I REALLY DIDN'T WANT TO BE ON THE OTHER END OF THESE LETTERS, BUT YOU WERE. YOU ARE.

I WAS ANGRY. MOSTLY AT MYSELF. I'D RATHER IT HAVE BEEN, NO, IT DOESN'T MATTER WHOSE NAME I WRITE BECAUSE I'D WANTED IT BE ANYONE BUT YOU. FOR THAT, I'M SORRY TOO.

YOU SHOULD KNOW, OR, I WANT YOU TO KNOW, THAT I WAS GOING TO ANSWER YOU, ABOUT BEING FRIENDS.

I WAS GOING TO SAY YES. DESPITE BEING YOU, I'D NEVER FELT UNDERSTOOD THE WAY YOU GET ME. NOBODY IN THIS SHITTY LITTLE TOWN HAS EVER GOTTEN ME IN THE WAY YOU DO--DID.

I'M ASKING YOU TO, NOT FORGIVE ME, BUT AT LEAST DO THIS ASSIGNMENT. YOU HAVE ONE MORE SCHOOL YEAR AHEAD OF YOU, DON'T START IT BY HAVING TO RETAKE A COURSE FOR A SEMESTER BECAUSE I'M BEING AN ASSHOLE. SELFISHLY, I ALSO WANT TO WALK AT MY GRADUATION IN A FEW WEEKS.

KNOW HOW YOU TOLD ME ABOUT YOUR OLD MAN FUELING YOUR ANGER THAT NIGHT? MINE GOT KICKED OUT OF THE HOUSE THIS WEEKEND. I FIND OUT THIS EVENING IF I'LL BE A BIG HALF-BROTHER TO SOME KID OF HIS SECRETARY. IT DOESN'T EXCUSE MY BEHAVIOR WHEN WE WERE AT THE POOL ON SATURDAY. BUT I HAD A LOT GOING ON. I HAVEN'T SEEN JOHN SINCE I WAS FOURTEEN.

YOU TRIED AND I JUST KEPT PUSHING YOU AWAY, FOR THAT YOU ARE CORRECT. AND I'M SORRY.

I'M JUST, I'M REALLY SORRY AND I'M ONLY NOW REALIZING IT, AND I KNOW THAT MAKES ME OUT TO BE THE BIGGEST ASSHOLE EVER, BUT IT'S THE TRUTH. IT'S HOW I FEEL.

-STEVE

12. Angry People Are Not Always Wise

Notes for the Chapter:

uh, the bits in italics during the chat with Mrs. J are from *Pride and Prejudice*...i found it fitting and i went with it.

you guys, you really know how to melt my heart with all this love for this fic!

next chapter will be about the hookey day...i've got it planned out, i just need to write it out.

...i also apologize if this feels at all fillerish...i try so hard not to have filler chapters!

As the bell rang, signalling the end of English, Steve didn't move. He didn't gather things like the rest of his classmates. He kept glancing at Billy all period--had he gotten the letter? Steve hoped it got to the right locker. He'd told some junior it was from some girl, asking it to make its way to Billy Hargrove's locker. He doesn't even know what Mrs. Johnson had talked about during class.

There was a question on the board though, so he assumed that was to be the next assignment--When was the last time you immediately regretted something you said?

Steve wondered for a moment, if it was because of *them*, he and Billy, if that's why she had that question on the board, or if it was a coincidence? She'd said something about Austen, or something. He really wasn't paying attention.

Movement from Billy caught his attention and he noticed he'd pulled out a sheet of paper and held it out for Mrs. Johnson to take--had he missed something?

He watched as she read whatever was written before glancing up and over at Steve, then down at Billy.

“‘You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled.’ How very fitting for the two of you.”

Billy scoffed and Steve had no idea to what she was referring to. He wasn't about to ask because he really didn't want to look like an even bigger idiot than he was feeling.

“Steve, I must ask you, do you feel as if Billy has helped channel your errant emotions throughout these letters? As if you recognize that you need a moment to gather your thoughts and feelings and sort through them to get to what you really mean? And Billy, I ask you, do you feel as if Steve has done the same for you?”

She glanced between the two of them, allowing them a few moments to gather their thoughts to answer her.

Steve raised his hand, he felt stupid doing it with only the three of them in the classroom, but it was what it was.

“Go ahead.”

He put his hand down and fiddled with his pencil, “I, I believe so. I mean, it's been very helpful to see me through someone else's eyes. Even the negative things we, uh, I shared with him. I know that a few times I started to write a reply using my initial emotional response, but I'd restart them. Or I tried to at least.”

She nodded and turned towards Billy who was staring across the room at Steve. As if seeing him for the first time for the day.

“‘Angry people are not always wise.’ I have become very aware of how emotionally stupid I can be. I am quick to anger, and not always justifiably so. To follow our current novel, ‘*From the very beginning—from the first moment, I may almost say—of my acquaintance with you, your manners, impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form the groundwork of disapprobation on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike;*’

"I was new. I asked around, find out who was top dog, so to say, and I heard all about *King Steve* . I didn't understand how someone who held that kind of power over others could just toss it aside as if it were nothing. To be even more of a giant nerd, I'll quote Lizzie herself, '*I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine.*' "

Billy let out a sigh, "Harrington, you *do* get me in a way that *no one* ever has before. That's something that terrifies me because I hate being vulnerable to *anyone* . But the thing of it is, I didn't *mind* it when we exchanged letters. At least when you didn't know it was me at first. You force me to own my shit, more so than my usual. I was not prepared for what that means."

Steve noticed Mrs. Johnson smiling and nodding along.

"I'm glad you can admit your shit stinks too, but I just, I *meant* it when I said I *can't* be friends with someone like you. I'm sorry."

He'd gotten up and left the classroom so fast that both Mrs. Johnson and Steve were startled into silence and left staring after Billy out the door.

Steve hated how emotional that just made him. He felt like he wanted to hit something. Like he wanted to cry. Like he wanted to laugh, loud and empty.

"I need to call my dad."

Mrs. Johnson just nodded at him, dismissing him with a wave of her hand. He didn't like the pity in her eyes, not directed at him--not after *that* .

He rushed to the office and could feel the sting of tears welling up in his eyes; the secretary didn't even hesitate to hand over the phone. He dialed home.

"Harrington residence."

"*Dad* ," he got out before he had to take a deep breath to sort himself out. He'd quickly handed the phone over to the secretary who looked like she would have turned a blind eye to Steve leaving early, especially looking the way he does.

He'll realize later, after he's talked with both his dad and John, that he left everything at school. All spread out over his desk. He'd apologize to her the next day.

Now though, now he was sitting in his car trying to put the key in the ignition and turn it over. He couldn't even start his car--why was this so hard? It was a stupid assignment, and all he did was answer some questions about himself. No reason to get bent out of shape because the kid who beat the shit out of him didn't like him at all. Didn't even want to be his friend.

He glanced out in front of his car and noticed a sheet of paper under his windshield wiper. He groaned and opened his door, climbing back to get whatever bullshit was on his windshield.

He snatched it from underneath the blade, realizing it was paper folded around something not paper, it was too stiff.

It was a photo. It was *the* photo. The moment both he and Billy told Mrs. Johnson about. The last time he'd sung out loud. Steve's back is mostly to the living room, but he has a wooden spoon in his hand, profile on view. He's smiling and singing down at Max, who's looking up at him with a large grin, a whisk in her hand. She's facing the living room but only has eyes on Steve. They'd been so oblivious to everyone around them in that moment.

He'd *needed* a moment like that. Where life just disappeared down to Elvis, he, and Max, singing to their heart's content. For some reason his mind went to the night Max shared with he and Dustin that Billy knows the entire dance to Footloose. He knew that night it was a hard thought to process, but now that he's had glimpses of Billy as a whole, he's not surprised.

He glances around, looking for Jonathan's car--he doesn't know why, he's the one leaving early for the day. He sighs and gets back in his car and finally starts it to head home.

When he pulls up to the house he realizes John's rental isn't there, but his dad's car is. He gathers himself together and heads inside.

"Hey Steve, how are you kid?"

His dad's voice was coming from the living room where music was playing from the stereo system. Steve followed the sounds.

"Hi Dad. Still overwhelmed, but leaning towards shitty. I uh, I fucked up what probably could've been a best friendship with a kid in my english class because I'm emotionally retarded. You hear from your secretary yet?"

His dad nodded, "Well, it'll take a few weeks before we get official results, but she did get a sonogram done, and the timeline adds up. We were in Seattle."

Steve sat down at the other end of the couch and just stared at the wall. What do you say to that?

"I have an apartment in the city, not too far from the office. I'll leave you the address in case you ever want to visit. This, uh, heh, I need to be honest with you son."

Steve turned and looked at his dad, and took in his demeanor--the man looked defeated.

"Turkey, you know, I started calling you that because you were the chubbiest baby I'd ever seen. You were my little butterball turkey. Nothing ever prepares you for parenthood Steve, nothing. I have all the money in the world at my disposal and you're graduating from high school in a few weeks, and I, I don't have a clue as to the young man you've grown up to be. That's on me. That will always be on me. Don't you ever blame yourself for my shitty fatherhood."

Steve was not expecting any of that. He looked back at the wall as his dad carried on.

"I need you to know that sometimes two people get married for love, but if that's the *only* reason you're sharing your life with someone, you're going to end up where your mother and I are. I love her, deeply, but we're not, we haven't been *in* love with each other in a long time. It was so easy to put on the charade around business meetings and outings and fundraisers, but when we were in the same house, or apartment, or hotel suite, we became strangers. Your mom headed to John and Rodney's long before the Seattle trip.

"I'm not asking you to forgive me for hurting you, or your mother, I'm just asking that you understand where I'm coming from. Kelly has been with the company for about twelve years, and about half of that, she and I have been having an affair."

"Dad! *Six years!* You and mom couldn't have had a conversation about the deterioration of your relationship in *six* years? And if you don't get married for love, then what do you get married for? What's the whole point if love isn't the glue that holds it all together?"

Steve stood and started pacing. He really didn't want to talk about this right now, not after the day he had.

"Where's Uncle John?"

He noticed his father's shoulders tense.

"Grocery shopping. He left right after you called. Who uh, who was the young man that John brought in the house? The one with the blue camaro?"

Steve started laughing. He was losing his goddamn mind, and there was nothing he could do about it.

"Depends on who you ask. According to the kids, he's a psychopath and the boy who has a crush on me. Let's see, according to Mrs. Johnson, he's the best friend I could ever have if I just took my head out of my ass and stopped putting my foot in my mouth. Uncle John thinks the guy shits rainbows because he gets cars on the same level John gets cars."

"I asked *you* . You didn't tell me who you think he is."

Steve looked at his dad, he looked genuinely interested. Steve sighed, threw his hands up and started pacing again.

"I don't know what I think about him if I'm being completely honest with you."

"What's his name?"

"Billy. Billy Hargrove. He's a junior, but very smart so he's taking a

senior English class. He uh, his family moved from California last year. The redhead you saw, that's his step-sister, Max."

He'd stopped pacing and just looked at his dad. He had no idea where this conversation was going and he wasn't sure about what direction he wanted it to go in.

"What happened today then? I imagine you making that comment about Mrs. Johnson stemmed from something between the two of you? Did he tell you that he has a crush on you? Because if you're being an asshole to a kid who's just trying to get his feelings out, li--"

"OH MY GOD!! No! That's not even, JESUS, *why* would you say something like that to me?"

Both Harrington men looked confused.

"I would think having Uncle John and Uncle Rodney in your life, you'd be a bit more tolerant and open to how others live their life Steve. I know what you think *I* think of people like John and Rodney, and according to your kids, Billy, but I'm telling you, here and now, my opinion can change. I honestly don't care what people do behind closed doors a long it's consensual and on no level illegal.

"Not everyone is tolerant, or open to people who do things differently than what is deemed the societal norm. This whole situation with your mother and I puts things into perspective. It opens your mind to a whole world of possibilities, and looking at things differently."

Steve scoffed, "So now, because your life is falling apart, you're going to suddenly welcome my uncles with open arms? After the decades you've spent making snide comments about them and their relationship? They've been together for twenty years! That's a big deal for anyone, period. Then add on all the shit they get from everyone else, and that's pretty amazing."

His dad crossed the room to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a drink. He offered the bottle towards Steve, who just nodded. He accepted the drink offered and gulped most of it down in one go. His dad only raised a brow in response.

“Dad, you’re an asshole. That’s what you’ve been my entire life, an asshole. You never made time for your family. You and mom tried buying my love and affection. I can’t be bought. And now, you’re realizing you have an almost adult son who you know nothing about. But you get a second chance, you have this new kid, a kid you can get to know and watch grow up, not hand off to nannies or other caretakers.

“I’m glad you’re finally taking your head out of your ass, and I guess that’s where I get it from, but I’ll send you cards and what not, and I’ll gladly babysit if you ever need one, turns out I’m a pretty good one of those. I’ll see you at graduation, but I can’t do this. Not now. Not after so long of not doing it at all.”

Steve turned and walked out of the living room and up to his room.

John found him sprawled out on the floor an hour or so later, his radio turned up just enough to be loud, but mostly a distraction.

“Your dad’s gone, for real this time. Left you an envelope of money and one of his credit cards. Said it wasn’t to buy you, he just wants to make sure that you’re taken care of with your mom being away and all. Nothing out of the norm.”

“I really don’t want to talk about him right now.”

John stood over him and smiled, “Good, you can tell me all about that delightful young man that knows cars.”

Steve glared up at him, “You too! What is it about him that has you *and* dad asking about him?”

John put his hands up, “Hey now, I just got here. I had no idea you and pops talked about him. I feel a little jealous though, you actually told your dad before you told me.”

Steve scoffed, “Over what? Telling him that I don’t really know anything about Billy?”

Steve knew immediately that was a lie. He knows that Billy likes board games, and apparently all the nerdy things the kids are into. He’s very smart, like Steve knows he will never be on Billy’s level of

smart. He knows that he's compassionate to those he cares about. He loves books, and wants his own library one day.

"Yeah, okay, that look on your face just now tells me otherwise. Spill kiddo. What makes him tick?"

"I don't know anymore. I uh, I fucked up."

John sat down on the floor beside him, nudged him a little, "Talk to me kiddo. You know I'm not going to judge anything you tell me. Ever. I haven't yet, have I?"

Steve smiled, "No, no you haven't, and thanks for being my sounding board sometimes."

John smiled down at him. Steve fidgeted with his hands.

"You remember last fall, when mom sent you photos of my busted up face, well that was Billy's handiwork. The shitstorm that was the disaster of last fall, and the year before that, uh I had just so happened to be the straw that broke the camel's back that night for Billy.

"He'd apparently gotten into it with his old man, and from what I gather, they don't agree on much. Max had snuck out during the time that he was supposedly babysitting her, and his dad made him go all over town looking for her. He found her with me, at the Byers' house.

"I, I have mixed feelings about him, in the sense that I know he's the asshole that beat the shit out of me last fall, but he's also the person who was writing me these letters, showing me another side to a person I didn't think could exist in someone like him.

"When we were taking the kids home the other day, when he came back for Max, he uh, he shoved a letter in my hands. Like, *I* knew it was *him* I was writing to, I'd figured it out and all, but I hadn't realized *he* knew it was *me* that he was writing to. Uh, Mrs. Johnson had us talk things through earlier, or at least try to.

"He was quoting *Pride and Prejudice* at me, well, both he and Mrs. Johnson were. Then he told me that he couldn't be friends with someone like me and just walked out. We were so shocked that we

just let him get up and walk out of the classroom. He wouldn't look at me at all. I, I even tried sending him a letter to explain myself, to explain Nancy's meddling; I told some junior girl it was a letter for Billy from some girl and could she please deliver it to his locker."

John chuckled a little, "Sorry, sorry. You were pretty desperate huh?"

"I told Nancy I was done with her. For good. I said 'fuck you' to her, and I meant it!"

"What she did was kinda shitty, well no, it was really shitty. Just because you have history with her, that shared trauma, doesn't mean you're automatically best friends for life. People change. She did something you explicitly told her not to. She broke your trust. You are justified in telling her to fuck off. And if you think I'm going to ignore the whole Pride and Prejudice thing, you're delusional kid! Tell me more!"

Steve nudged John's leg with his own and rolled his eyes, "You're an ass!"

"Yes, but you're still telling me a story, so come on, spill!"

Steve sighed, "I don't like to admit that I've read this book before, well, more than once. He quoted both Mr. Darcy, and Elizabeth at me. Made a comparison of our first impressions, something about wounding his pride first. Then something about anger, and it's just been a long day. Like I didn't even *realize* what they were quoting when it started.

"Dad's having a baby with his secretary. Mom would rather be awol than deal with her own kid, or her failed marriage. I haven't gotten any letters from any of the schools that I applied to. I have no idea if I'm going to pass this class because Billy refuses to complete the rest of the letters.

"Said he can't be vulnerable with me, not again. I just, I want to walk at graduation. I want to just get out of this town, but I worry about my kids, you know? I have no idea what to do. I'm kind of freaking out a little bit. Is it normal to feel crushed? Like I can't breathe?"

John looked down at him and nodded, "Stress does weird things to a body. Yours is responding to your stress. Just remember to bring yourself back to the present moment. Count to ten, or practice breathing slowly for ten reps. Something to ground yourself in the now."

Steve took a few deep breaths and found it helped immediately.

"Tell you what, no matter what any of your letters say, when they start to arrive, you can always come stay with Rodney and I for a while, get your head on right before venturing out into the world. You can help me at the shop, earn some money."

"How come mom's never taken me to visit you guys there? We always meet in the city, or on a beach somewhere else."

"She's nervous. About you. She is being a Mom about something she has no right to make a choice on. She thinks she has pull in a matter that she does not and will not. Ever."

Steve furrowed his brows, "She thinks I'm like you."

John nodded.

Steve felt, not gutted, but pretty close.

"I don't care about packaging. I said that to Billy in one of our letters. I've noticed both girls and boys are pretty. I don't think I care about the outside as much as I do what's on the inside."

John gave him a soft smile and nodded, "And that's okay. You know that right?"

"Oh, yeah, I, I've never doubted myself. It's something I do pride myself on, at least I've never doubted that part of myself."

"Your dad left you a note to play hookey tomorrow. So, we're going to do absolutely nothing that you don't want to do, okay? I'm going to go make us some dinner because I'm kind of hungry, and you're a teenage boy so I know you're famished. I'll come get you when it's done."

Steve nodded and watched John get to his feet.

He felt, well, he felt a lot. He felt relieved that he finally told someone how he feels in general. He feels, still terrified about his future, but he's got a back-up plan should he need one.

Tomorrow was a new day.

Today was done.

Fucking finally.

He allowed the music to wash over him, erase his thoughts, and just be in the moment. Music could always ground him.

13. Hadn't Noticed

He'd accomplished *nothing* today.

He could not focus on *anything* that was going on.

He couldn't eat breakfast. Or lunch. He might force dinner, just to get some food in his body.

He knew, *he knew*, all of this was because he no longer has his outlet to the one person who gets him. He could swallow his pride and write the newest assignment.

He knows what he said. He knows what he regrets about it.

But he *can't*.

He's too stubborn in his conviction. Plus, he is very aware of the rumors the kids are sharing amongst themselves. *Billy has a crush on Steve. Steve hates Billy. Billy likes boys. What if Steve actually likes Billy? Steve didn't say he actually hates Billy. What if they like each other? Steve can do so much better. Can Billy even be nice?*

He doesn't understand how they're so invested in his life.

He stares out the window, it's an ugly view--cars and trees.

"The bell rang ten minutes ago, Mr. Hargrove. You're a million miles away from here today."

Billy turned to look up at Mrs. Johnson, "Uh, yeah. I mean yes, ma'am. I'm sorry about yesterday."

She gave him the saddest smile, "You and I both know that I'm not the one you should be apologizing to."

He felt that flash of rage that comes so easily. He clenched his jaw.

"You know that you are allowed to feel things, right? Anger, sadness, anxiousness, just because you are a young man doesn't mean that you don't have feelings."

His eyes felt that sting of building tears, but he blinked them away. He wasn't going to cry. Not here. And definitely not about *that*.

"Have you ever told Steve about how he wounded your pride?"

Billy looked away from her, "I don't mean any disrespect, but I really don't want to talk about it. Him."

"Then write to him. If you won't tell me, you can tell him. I'd hate to see the progress of growth between the two of you come to an abrupt end because of feelings being hurt."

"I'm not, my feelings aren't hurt!"

She stared at him, raising a brow, "Mr. Hargrove, that was an emotional response. I don't judge you, or any of my students. I'll tell you again, none of your feelings are invalid just because you're a young man."

Billy let out an empty laugh and shook his head.

"I have to go."

She waved him off. He didn't want to acknowledge the look in her eyes. At all.

He gathered his things and exited the classroom, headed for the cafeteria.

He was a hall away when he was shoved against the wall.

"*What* did you do?"

He rolled his eyes.

"Wheeler, I don't have a clue about what you're referring to."

"Steve didn't come to school today."

"Hadn't noticed."

Lies. It was the only thing he focused on all day.

“Bullshit.”

He smirked down at her, “I’m very aware of how *he* feels about *you* . I don’t hit girls, but I could make an exception for you.”

She quickly removed her hands and looked at him, “He told you?”

Billy didn’t mean to laugh in her face; “Princess told me *all* about you. And how you cheated on him. How *quickly* you moved on. How you took something from him he told you not to, and how you made sure that *I* found it. I don’t really care what *you* think of me because my thoughts on you are nonexistent, but I do care about what Princess thinks. And he’s told me that I should stay away from people like you.”

He was glad to see her deflate a little bit. She thought she had the upper hand and she was wrong.

“You still did something.”

“And you’re like a dog with a bone. I’m pretty sure that Harrington wants nothing to do with you. I know that if you broke my trust like that, I would never speak to you again. Are we done here?”

It wasn’t a question. She opened her mouth but then closed it.

He shoved by her, knocking into her shoulder on his way.

He changed direction and headed towards the gym. Harrington was spot on about being able to clear your head with a long run.

He’s been talking with himself about a lot of things. Neil. Susan. Max. California. Steve.

The latter causing more problems than his old man.

See, he knows that he’s not going to change the one thing that Neil will never accept about him. He’s known since he was ten that he prefers boys to girls. He can still play the game, but he knows that he’s not a full blooded heterosexual male.

Neil doesn’t need to keep reminding him.

He knows how Grandpa Hargrove was before he died. Cold, cruel, and definitely set in his ways. Billy couldn't imagine growing up with that kind of father and turn out, not like Neil.

The little bit of kindness in him is all that's left of his mom. She'd been a fucking saint for putting up with Neil for as long as she did. Her death certainly didn't help Neil's shining personality for the better. One one hand Billy understands that losing the one person you thought you were going to spend the rest of your life with, it fucks you up.

He will never make excuses for his father's shitty parenting skills, because he does pretty okay with Max. He's always asking about her day, how she's liking it here, and how her little group of friends are. She and he both know that if Neil ever found out about Lucas Sinclair, it'd be a whole different ball game, but for now, Billy will keep Max's secret.

He doesn't understand where the racial hatred comes from, especially from being out in California, but certain mindsets linger all over the world.

Billy knows that Susan is the biggest push over he's ever met, and that's probably why Neil married her five years after mom died. Billy's mom was a very independent woman and didn't need Neil in her life. He remembers lots of fights about her making more money than him when he was supposed to be in his room asleep.

He knows that he'd want to be with someone who respected him for all that he is, asshole tendencies and every bad day that comes with him. He likes to argue, push buttons, but he needs someone who will not take his shit and dish it right back in his face. He knows that he'll never find it living in Hawkins, Indiana.

He has the delusional hope that he could, potentially, find it here, but he's not getting his hopes up. He knows better. Besides, he and Kev have a plan. They both graduate from high school next year, and Billy plans to return to California, go to UCLA, earn a BA in English, and then go for a MA in Comparative Literature. He'd work in a mechanic's shop to earn money, and live in a shitty two bedroom apartment or house with Kev.

He changed into his gym clothes and headed out to the track. His mind immediately recalling the day he approached Harrington.

He'd rounded the corner and saw the three of them sitting together, clustered close. As if all three of them were touching each other in some capacity. They were so lost in their own little bubble they hadn't even heard him approach.

"Well isn't this a site to behold, Wheeler keeping her pets fed."

He felt rather smug when all three of them flinched at the sound of his voice. He glanced down at Harrington, the letter he was holding in his hands is what initially drew him over. He saw his own handwriting. He'd known he was writing to one of the kids in class that struggled with words and letters.

He hated that the Byers freak locked eyes on him. Noticed that he flinched just a little at recognizing his own handwriting in Harrington's lap. He'd seen the boy smiling down at what he was reading. He'll never admit how much jealousy he felt in that split second.

"I have to ask, how does this ménage à trois work? The masses want to know!"

He knew he should've just kept walking.

Especially when Wheeler got to her feet and sauntered into his personal space. She's not ugly, but she's not his type. At all.

Her smile alarmed him; "You really want to know what we do?"

He was slightly curious as to what their deal is. Rumors only hold so much truth after they've spread like wildfires. Like an idiot, he nodded.

She pressed a little closer, enough that he could feel her body heat; "It's Monday, and on Mondays Stevie does all the work. His tongue deserves all the rumors it gets. And his dick, well, let's just say that we are never disappointed. You interested in joining us?"

He hated that his cheeks flamed. He'd heard rumors. He'd heard chicks talking about Steve Harrington's bedroom habits. Chicks that had slept with him, and some that hadn't.

He didn't judge them if they actually were a threesome. Kev dabbled as an extra body with some of his friends. But Billy knew that if he could have Harrington, even if for a moment, he was not going to want to share.

"I'm uh, I'm not sure if I'm the uh, sharing type."

He looked at each of them before he walked off. Making sure not to look at Harrington first or last.

He heard their laughter once he turned the corner and hated that his cheeks burned even more. They were laughing at him. Maybe Harrington was on to something with running. He'd give it a try.

In hindsight, Billy knows that he enjoyed running for the same reasons that Harrington does. It is a good means to clear your head. To find focus if needed.

He'd kept his distance, making sure his pace kept him on the opposite side of the track the whole time.

Until he noticed that Harrington was lost in his own head. More so than just a run to clear his head, he was stuck in it. So much so that Billy was able to catch up to him.

He watched as something like dread appeared on the other boy's face and then as he stumbled with a few steps. He almost reached out to catch him.

"Didn't know you were that out of shape, Harrington."

He immediately wished he hadn't said that. He could've said anything else--he could've talked about the fucking weather!

Steve Harrington looked livid; "What is your fucking deal? I get it man, you hate my guts, so leave me the hell alone!"

Both boys were momentarily surprised at Harrington's outburst. Billy was not expecting the other boy to say anything.

He took a step back, "For what it's worth, I don't hate you, and I'm sorry."

Harrington's eyes widened. Billy did not like the emotion present in them.

"Six months, six fucking months, and that's how you apologize for almost killing me? You're lucky you didn't cause me any real damage! You've had it out for me since you got here and I didn't do anything to you!"

He'd pushed Billy with almost every word he spat out. Billy couldn't fault him. He deserved it.

"You were going after a kid; Lucas is just a kid! I wasn't going to stand for that, not with what we were already dealing with that night. You come along pissed off at the goddamn world and took it out on all of us. You're an asshole!"

The other boy had pressed closer with each statement and his eyes widened in shock when he realized just how close he was to Billy.

For a moment, Billy had the fleeting thought, this must be what they mean by love at first sight. He liked a guy who could speak his mind, show how passionate his feelings ran.

"Feel better getting all that out, pretty boy? Your panties unwadded now?"

Again, he should not have said that. His knee-jerk reaction sometimes is to bite back just as hard, if not harder. Harrington makes it so easy sometimes.

"Eat my shorts you asshole!"

Billy crowded into his space, "I beat you once before, I have no problem doing it again, Harrington. And nobody's here to stop me this time around."

Billy will never tell anybody, not even Kevin, how terrified he felt with Max standing over him holding that nail-studded bat, yelling Neil's words down at him.

Harrington just sighed; "You're not worth my time, or my effort, Hargrove. The sooner that clicks in your thickheaded brain, the sooner you can leave me the hell alone."

Billy felt his insides go cold. He never wanted to hear Neil's words from other people's mouths--ever.

Harrington had ignored him. He had no idea what he'd say if the other boy had actually turned back around. Instead he solidified just how little Billy meant to him. But he would listen to his words, he'd leave him alone.

He hadn't anticipated meeting Jane just a little while later. That kid gave him the heebie-jeebies like whoa. Like she put his teeth on edge.

But she was so nice to him. It's like she can read his mind, or see into his very dark, pitiful, soul.

He remembered punching Tommy in the face the next day after game night. He'd tried talking shit out, being a decent person, like Steve Harrington suggested, and Tommy had just called him a pussy and laughed in his face. Now, now he understands where Harrington was coming from--he wanted to stop writing him because Billy is Billy. Grade A asshole. Pissed off at the world. Doesn't care who gets lost being in his way.

Fuck this shit. He was done with the day. He made his way back inside and to his gym locker, gathered his things and just headed out to his car. He'd go sit out by the middle school and wait for Max.

He noticed a piece of paper folded up, stuck under his wiper blade. Maybe Harrington had changed his mind. He needed to get over that kid. It was going to end in heartache. Straight boys always did.

He unfolded the paper and couldn't help the small smile that spread on his lips. It was the photo he'd asked Byers for. Of Max. Well, of Max's smile, so wide, so big, so free. Perhaps this will give him a free pass so-to-say for the evening. Susan will love it. Maybe he'd save the half that had Harrington smiling down at her for himself.

He knows, right here and now, that he's forgiven her--Max. For what she did.

14. Please Don't

Notes for the Chapter:

this one got away from me...little over 3k in words...

i hope you guys like it!

Steve stared at the boy standing on his front steps. Or rather, who was sitting down on them, smoking a cigarette. Who looked like he'd been *waiting* for Steve to get back home.

"I'm going to go on inside, you two going to be okay on your own?"

Steve wanted to be a petty bitch and tell John no, that they required adult supervision because apparently the two of them could not be left alone together. But he didn't. He shook his head and took a few steps towards Billy, "This seat taken?"

Billy didn't acknowledge him. He took the last few drags of his cigarette and then tossed it to the ground, crushing it with his heel.

Steve didn't sit down. He wasn't going to. Not if Billy didn't want him in his space.

"I'm, I've never," Billy started, then got to his feet, "I'm not the kind of guy that has friends. Not, not in the way that matters to most people. I mean, I, I have a great friend, we've kept in touch from the move, but he's it. I never,"

Steve watched as Billy started pacing. Running his hands through his hair, tugging at the edges of his open jacket, or clenching and unclenching his fists. He will wait, for however long Billy needs, to talk about whatever he's trying to tell him.

Billy stopped after a few moments and looked Steve in the eye, "I hated the fact that the moment I met you, everything everyone told

me about you was a lie. Sure, you were King Steve, but you didn't care. You didn't care what anyone else thought about you. You were so unimpressed by everything going on, I took it personally."

Steve nodded, not wanting to say anything. Fucking Nancy.

Billy let out a choked off laugh, "The things that I had been told about you, I saw so much of myself in that asshole that I wanted to knock you down off your pedestal, but I couldn't. I saw your apathy in the way you immediately began looking for your girl when you noticed she was gone. How you made sure that, despite breaking your heart moments before you left, you still made sure that she was going to get home safely. Assholes don't do that shit."

Billy reached into his pocket and pulled out his lighter and started fiddling with it. Steve wonders what he'd think if he knew that he does the same thing with his lighters.

"I'm sorry, Steve."

He blinked at the other boy.

He has no idea what to say. *Me too* doesn't feel adequate enough.

"You uh, I'll finish the assignment, but Mrs. J knows that I'm verbally doing this one."

"I'm, uh, I'll be honest with you, I don't know what to say. As far as the assignment goes, if that's what you want, we can do that."

Billy took a deep breath and let it out for a while.

"Harrington, the words that I immediately regret saying, I haven't even spoken them. Not outloud."

Steve maneuvered himself to the stairs and patted the spot next to him. Billy took a moment, but sat down beside him.

"Hargrove, Billy, I--"

Billy cut him off, "Let me just, *please* , let me just get this out, and then we'll go from there."

Steve nodded.

"I like boys. It's not a phase. It's why we moved. I, I'm why we moved here. Max uh, she caught me with a guy, and she told Neil and her mom. I drove with bruised ribs, and pissed pink for days after that night. The thing that I regret saying was the first time I blamed Max.

"I'd told her that she was the biggest piece of shit in the world. That if it weren't for Neil, her mom would have let her father take her in. I uh, I said a lot of mean things to her.

"But at the end of the day, I meant those words. I said them. Borrowing your words. I never wanted a sibling, let alone a sister, but she, she's a really great kid. She's whip smart too, and she's not afraid to be herself, or stand up for herself.

"She intimidates me, but it's in the best way possible. She will never be me. Never be like me, and I will never have to fear for her being taken advantage of. I pity the dumbass who ever tries."

"Max is my favorite, but don't tell Dustin that. Or her. She'd kick my ass! Uh, did, did Jonathan give you a picture?"

Steve noticed the apples of Billy's cheeks tinge pink as the other boy nodded.

"Yeah, Byers left it on my car. I uh, I haven't given it to Susan yet. I'm kind of using it as a free pass, or hoping it'll be a free pass. She, uh Max, hasn't sung out loud since before we moved. You two had no idea that we were all watching you," Billy smiled, "You guys just sung that stupid song to each other, eyes on nothing and nobody else. I uh, thank you for giving her that. I haven't seen her smile like that in a while."

Steve nodded. He still had no idea what to say.

"Can I, uh, can I ask you something?"

Billy turned to look at Steve, "Go crazy, Harrington."

"What did you mean when you said you couldn't be friends with someone like me?"

"You like to get right to it, don't you? I can appreciate that."

Steve watched as he fidgeted with his hands.

"Do you want me to be completely honest with you? I don't think you'll appreciate what I have to say."

Steve offered a small smile, "Go crazy, Hargrove."

Billy smirked, "Your little darlings are telling you the truth."

"What?"

"You haven't heard their latest gossip? As much as they run their mouths, you haven't heard?"

Steve felt his stomach flip, but he wasn't going to say anything. He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

Billy gave him a soft smile, looking at him through his lashes, "You're a terrible liar, you know that?"

"It's kind of my thing. The kids know that if the grown ups tell me anything they'll get it out of me."

Billy turned his body to face Steve, "Your little band of misfits thinks I have a crush on you."

"That's why you can't be my friend? Because you have a crush on me?"

Steve hadn't meant to stand up, but he did, he turned and put his hands on his hips, looking down at Billy Hargrove, who hadn't taken his eyes off of him.

"In case you haven't noticed, Harrington, I'm not a half-assed kind of guy. I want you, all of you. I can't just be your friend because I want to be more than *just* your friend. And I've been here before, friends with the straight boy I have a crush on, so forgive me for wanting to spare myself some heartache."

Steve watched Billy fumble with his pack of cigarettes, and then with

his lighter when he finally got a stick in his mouth.

He sat back down beside him.

“Why couldn’t you just talk to me about this?”

He realized immediately how stupid questions do exist and he just asked one.

“You can call me Steve, you know.”

Billy exhaled little o’s of smoke while Steve tried to gather his thoughts and his words.

“Can’t call you *Stevie* ? And why would I just come up to you and talk to you about my feelings? Do you even think before you speak sometimes?”

Steve snatched the stick out of Billy’s mouth, took a quick few drags and then handed it back.

“You can call me whatever you want. I just want to know why you think I’d hate you for having a crush on me. I’m not, I, I like to think I don’t give off that impression that I’m against gay people. I’d be a hypocrite, you know, with my uncles and all.”

Billy stood up and quickly finished the cigarette, flicking it down on the ground and crushing it with the toe of his boot.

“Trust me, you’re nothing like my old man, so don’t worry your pretty boy face over how you come across to some people.”

The look on Billy’s face makes Steve think the other boy’s said too much.

“Speaking of, you mentioned the night you beat my face to a pulp, uh, you and your old man had gotten into it?”

“You don’t know when to quit do you? Jesus Harrington, like what do you want me to say?”

Steve put his hands up in what he hoped indicated a placating

manner, “Hey, hey, I, I’m sorry. I, my thoughts went to that night and then to your letter, and I get the impression that your dad’s a topic that you don’t or won’t talk about. Okay, I’m sorry. I, I can take a hint.”

Billy stood up and started to pace, “Look, I don’t, I’m not good with the whole friends thing. I just, I came here looking for you after school because you didn’t even show up, and you were on my mind all day. I got nothing accomplished yesterday. Then I show up here, nobody’s home. Your car’s in the drive but nobody’s answering the door, so I sat down and I waited.

“Why? Because if I’m being honest, I missed talking with you. I began to look forward to your letters, and getting a little bit more insight into who Steve Harrington is. I like him. He’s a pretty neat guy, and I’ll kick your ass if you tell anyone I called you neat.”

He smiled over at Steve, who was standing still, taking in every word Billy’s speaking.

“The bullshit with the lab, that’s all lies right? There was other shit that went down? Max was involved, because our house got a visit from some guys in suits flashing badges. Naturally she got off scott free, but I got a nice lecture on respect and responsibility.”

Steve realized Billy was waiting for a response; he was hung up on Billy admitting, for the second time now, that he likes him.

“Technically, we were forced to sign Non-Disclosure things, and I can’t exactly say anything explicit about it, but yes, everything the papers said about it afterwards, all lies.”

“You afraid of listening ears? I’ve got time to kill. I want details. I found my sister hiding out with you and her friends, then when I come to, my car is gone, and sue me, I got nosey as to why all the contents of the fridge were thrown about. What the fuck was in the fridge? Men with badges don’t intimidate me.”

Steve smiled, “You’ve been teaching Max how to drive. She drives just like you, can’t slow down for nothing. Swerved all over the road, and I don’t think she stopped at any stop signs.”

“We’re deflecting now?”

Steve shrugged, “Listening ears.”

Billy took a step closer, putting him directly into Steve’s personal space. He smiled, biting at his bottom lip, “Wanna go for a ride, Stevie?”

Steve felt his stomach flutter again, and his cheeks burn, but he nodded.

“Let me let John know.”

Billy took out a cigarette and nodded. Steve turned around and climbed up the steps and went into the house.

“John?”

“In the dining room kiddo.”

Steve walked through and saw him with a few papers spread out, “Uh, I’m going out. With uh, with Billy.”

He hated how stupid he just sounded. He definitely hated John’s little smirk.

“It’s *Billy* now? And where are you two going out to? How long will you be out? Is it going to be just the two of you, or are you meeting up with other people? Hold up, is this a date?”

“Whoa, NO! Calm down Uncle John! We uh, we have to talk about something, and I don’t want listening ears.”

John narrowed his eyes, “You’re sure you’re ready to be alone with him?”

Steve definitely felt his face burn more, “Uh, he, he um, he told me that, uh, he has a crush on me.”

“Oh sweet pea, I saw that before he got out of that beautiful car of his. The kids were talking about it when he went to look for you after breakfast. Just, from experience, and hear me out please?”

Steve knew he needed to acknowledge John's words or else he wouldn't continue; "All ears."

"He's a boy that likes boys. There is no pretending with girls; no putting on a show with some gay boys. Just, please don't lead him on."

Steve furrowed his brows, "Why would I do that? I'm not that kind of person."

"Kiddo, I know you mean well, and I think he appreciates it, but he took a big chance in just admitting to you that he has a crush on you. You *cannot* take it lightly."

"He told me that's why he couldn't be my friend, or *just* my friend. He'd want more. He distanced himself to save himself more heartache."

"Smart boy."

Steve felt indignant, "I'm not deliberately setting out to lead him on! I don't want to hurt him, I legitimately want to be his friend."

"Like you wanted to be Nancy's friend?"

"I'll be back later, I, if we stop somewhere for food, I'll bring you back something."

Steve turned and walked out towards the front door before John could say anything else.

He slammed the front door behind him, startling both himself and Billy, who was still smoking.

"You allowed to come out Princess? Or is the big bad wolf too much for you?"

Steve took a deep breath and rolled his eyes, "That was awful. And I'm hungry, so after we're done talking about *that night*, we're getting some food. I'm buying so don't even put that stick up your ass."

Billy smirked around his cigarette and waved his arm as if to tell

Steve, after you; “I’m driving though.”

Steve laughed, “You didn’t have a choice.”

He headed right for Billy’s car and climbed in the passenger side. He watched as Billy, well, stalked, for lack of a better word, towards his own car. He watched as he slid into his driver’s seat and stubbed out the end of his cigarette in his little dashboard ashtray.

“Damn Pretty Boy, if I’d known you looked that good sitting shotgun, I’d have been a hell of a lot nicer from the get go.”

Steve would deny, even on his deathbed, that he did not blush at those words.

Billy revved the engine and took off towards the other side of town.

“No more listening ears, spill the beans.”

Steve noted the radio silence, literally, the car wasn’t blaring its usual flare of music.

“The thing you found in the fridge?”

Billy just gave him a look before turning his attention back to the road.

“The kids called them demodogs. From the stupid game they play, the named a bigger threat a, uh, demogorgon. They’re from another dimension that connected with the lab. Shit did go down, but like the papers said, all lies. Nancy and Jonathan were, are, responsible for the leak of information from the uh, that investigator who scammed Barb’s parents.”

“Who’s Barb?”

Steve doesn’t know why he felt a sudden pain in his chest, she and he were hardly friends. Tolerated each other for the sake of Nancy. He hopes she knows how horrible he feels. Hindsight, well karma is not the only bitch.

“She uh, she was Nancy’s best friend. She, she was murdered in my

pool.”

“That explains why you stare at it like something’s going to come out and get you-- *oh* . Is, is that what happened to her?”

Steve nodded, “Uh yeah, um, Jonathan has photos somewhere. Apparently my pool was a portal, or doorway, or whatever, and uh, Barb, she, she’d cut her finger on her can of beer. Blood. They can smell blood from miles away. I guess one smelled hers through the portal and came through and got her. Will found her dead body.”

“Little Byers?”

Steve nodded and glanced around, he recognized the stretch of road. Billy was taking them to the quarry.

“He didn’t die, but that’s why kids call him Zombie Boy. There was a funeral and everything. He was stuck in The Upside Down. That’s what the kids call it. We have no idea how he survived for as long as he did. Not with those fucking monsters.

“Nancy pulled a gun on me. Pointed it in my face, told me to get out and fuck off when I came to apologize for a shitty thing I did. Uh, one of those demogorgon things came through the ceiling. Jonathan and I trapped it in their hallway and set it on fire. Uh, that’s where, I, I uh, got my bat. The one full of nails.”

Billy pulled into the quarry, up top, looking over the water down below and the woods and town in the distance. He turned the car off and turned to face Steve.

“Monsters from another dimension?”

“Look, I know it sounds crazy, but it’s the truth! Okay! I almost died saving those little shits because they wouldn’t listen to Joyce or Hop.”

Billy put his hands up, “Hey, I’m just trying to process all of this. I’m not saying I don’t believe you. Max was spooked for a few days after that night. I knew something was up. How uh, how have *you* been after all of that?”

Steve choked on a laugh, "Truth?"

Billy nodded.

"I can't sleep for shit. I manage maybe three hours tops most nights. If I get any at all. I keep all the lights on. It's been kind of nice having Uncle John and before he left, my dad, around. Subconscious comfort I guess. Knowing I'm not alone in that house."

"Is that what she fought with you about, at the Halloween party we met at?"

Steve deflated a little and nodded.

"She uh, she broke up with me when we were in the bathroom. Said that our love was bullshit. That, that *I* was bullshit."

"No offense, Harrington, but your taste in girlfriends are kinda shitty."

Steve smiled, "I know. Maybe my next relationship won't be a girlfriend. I'd told Nancy that night, I'm a pretty shitty boyfriend, but I'm a great babysitter."

Billy raised a brow, "You really like hanging out with the small nerds?"

"You have more in common than I do with them. You'd probably like them if you gave them a chance. I mean, Jane adores you."

Steve noticed Billy's cheeks go pink.

"She's a good kid. Creeps me out with the way it's like she can read my mind. And her and Max, must be a girl thing, sometimes they have whole conversations without saying anything to each other."

Steve laughed, "Definitely a girl thing."

Billy met Steve's eyes and maneuvered his body, so he was facing him more, "For uh, for what it's worth, I'm glad you didn't die that night. And I am very sorry about taking my anger out on you and the kids."

Steve mirrored Billy's position and nodded.

"Me too. I, I have nightmares, mostly about that night. Uh, some of them you succeed in killing me, and it's like I'm watching them all die because I wasn't there to protect them all. Max dies next. Then Lucas, dying trying to protect or get to her. Mike's after them, and it's always a fifty-fifty with Dustin. Sometimes he runs and makes it, and sometimes he doesn't."

"I, shit, I'm so sorry Steve."

He looked like he wanted to reach out and touch Steve. Steve took the initiative first, he placed his hand on Billy's forearm, "It's okay now. I forgive you. I told you that a while ago."

Billy looked down at Steve's hand on his arm and then up at Steve, he bit his lip before pulling his arm away.

"You promised me some food."

Steve noticed the slight tension set into Billy's shoulders, and then John's words crossed his mind-- *please don't lead him on* .

15. You Look So Beautiful

Notes for the Chapter:

so uh, i apologize NOW for the ending here...but the next chapter picks up immediately after this...

you get both POVs this time....uh, be warned Neil Hargrove's A + + parenting skills are mentioned and written about in this chapter and the next, so if that's a thing that bothers you, HEED THE WARNING...

“That's all you're going to order? A cup of coffee? Dude get some food.”

Steve waved his menu at Billy.

“I can pay for myself.”

Steve put his menu down and leaned over the table, “I'm not leading you on. I am genuinely offering to buy you some food. Please, humor me and get something.”

“ *I know*. I, I'm not hungry.”

“I recall a certain someone telling me that they were distracted all day, which I'm going out on a limb here, means that they didn't really eat much of anything.”

Steve kept eye contact with the other boy. Watching the internal struggle, recognizing the emotions flickering in his eyes.

“You boys ready to order?”

Steve nodded, but before he could get a word out Billy spoke up, “Yes ma'am, Stevie here is craving a bacon cheeseburger with fries, no tomato, little mayo, and you know what, that sounds good, so I'll

have the same thing, please.”

Steve nodded in agreement and hoped he was smiling and not making a stupid face. He hasn't had anyone order for him since he was seven years old and forced to attend work functions with his parents. He felt equal parts embarrassed and flattered. He used to do it for the girls he dated. They always blushed and smiled at him for doing so.

“I, uh, thank you.”

Billy, who hasn't taken his eyes off Steve, smiled. It was soft.

“No worries, amigo.”

“I, I'm, is, is this a date?”

Billy tilted his head and the look on his face brought Steve to that day in the showers after practice, when he tried not to steal glances at Billy, but the way he was looking at him then, and with that same look now, he wonders how oblivious he's been.

“I'm not going to say that I *don't* want it to be. I've already told you I'm interested. Do *you* want it to be a date?”

Wasn't that the million dollar question.

“So, hypothetically, if this was a date, how would the rest of the evening go?”

Billy smirked, “That's not a no. But I'll humor you Princess.”

Steve watched as Billy moved himself so he could lean over the table this time around. He glanced around and the voice that came out of his mouth, soft, velvety, and so fucking sweet, Steve was immediately smitten.

“Hypothetically, I picked you up, and I meant it when I said you look good riding shotgun. We made small talk, getting to know each other a little bit more. Now we're grabbing a bite to eat. I ordered for you because I know what you want.

"Now, if we weren't in this little shitstain town, I wouldn't think twice before I would reach out and take one of your hands into mine. I'd toy with your fingers, trail my fingertips along the lines of your palm. I'd revel in the little shivers your body would make.

"Then I'd trail my fingers up to your wrist, enclose them around it, gently tug your hand closer, bringing your hand up to my mouth. I'd press a kiss to each tip, then turn your hand over to press a kiss to your palm; the whole time I don't break our eye contact."

Steve didn't even have to acknowledge that he was absolutely blushing. His face felt hot. His chest felt like he was burning from the inside out.

"After we both finished with our meals, I'd offer you a drive. Which you completely understand is an invitation to continue my mouth touching your body. Because I would explore every single inch of you with my mouth.

"I'd park us somewhere without nosy people, get a blanket out of my trunk and lay it down on the ground before I opened your door and helped you out.

"As soon as I pull you to your feet I'd surprise you by lifting you up, hinting to wrap your legs around my waist, and then I would press a kiss to your mouth. Trail kisses to your ear, where I'd whisper promises to make you feel *so good* .

"I'd carry you around the car, to where I put the blanket down. Without letting you go, I'd get on my knees, keeping my grasp on you, before gently laying you down on your back. I'd settle down, between the v of your legs, pressing against you in just the right way."

He sat up, winked, "Food's coming."

Steve couldn't move. He just sat and stared at Billy. Watching as food was placed on the table in front of them. Watching as the other boy said thank you to the waitress and then as he dug into his burger.

"You going to eat, Pretty Boy?"

Steve blinked and reached out for a fry.

Billy was eyeing him, "I'm sorry, was, was that too much?"

"No!"

Steve said that way too quickly. Way too hard.

"You, you're uh, good. Not too much."

Billy smirked around the fry he was putting in his mouth, "I think I could get used to you being a horrible liar."

Steve threw the fry in his hand at Billy.

"I, I'm usually not the uh, the one being pursued. It's different is all."

He noticed the same tension in Billy's shoulders from the car earlier, when he'd put his hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry, Billy, I, I want you to be comfortable around me."

Billy pushed his half eaten plate away, "I, it, it's all me Stevie. I shouldn't be expecting more than what you're willing to offer. It's getting a little late, you ready to head home?"

Steve nodded, what could he say? Nothing.

He dug out his wallet and tossed money on the table, more than enough to cover the tab and tip. Billy had rushed out before the bills left Steve's hand.

Steve walked out slowly, taking in the sight of Billy, decompressing with a smoke, leaning against the side of his car. He really is a beautiful boy.

The tension has spread through his whole body now, not just in his shoulders. He watched the other boy take long, deep drags, and let out the smoke slowly.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer."

Steve wishes, in this moment, that he did have a camera. If only just

to capture this vision of Billy.

“Your eyes are closed, how did you know it was me?”

Billy smiled around his cigarette, “I know what your gaze feels like when it's on me.”

Steve flushed, he felt it from the tips of his ears, all the way down to his navel.

“I, why do you say things like that to me?”

“Are you bothered by it? ‘Cause that's a load of crap if you say yes. You were eating up *everything* I was saying inside.”

Steve noticed the difference in tone of voice.

“I'm really not trying to lead you on. I, I'm not that big of an asshole.”

Billy tossed his cigarette away, “I know. Get in so we can get you home before you turn into a pumpkin.”

Steve walked around to the passenger side and climbed in, “Dude, did you ever read a fairy tale? You're mixing up a bunch.”

Billy shrugged, “Keeps you guessing. At least you can recognize them. I've had some that just look at me like they have no idea what I'm talking about.”

The ride back to the Harrington residence was not awkwardly silent, but it wasn't a comfortable one either.

Billy didn't put the car in park when he pulled up to the door. Steve didn't want to know what that meant.

“Thanks for dinner, and uh, filling me in on the sketchy details. I'll see you around.”

Steve wordlessly got out and shut the door. He turned around and before he could wave goodbye, Billy was already backing down his driveway.

Steve had fucked up. It was a feeling that had settled deep in his stomach.

“Hey Buddy, you coming in tonight or what? Oh, he's gone pal. Probably already home with how long you've been standing out here. Want to talk about it?”

Steve looked up at John, shook his head, then darted into the house, up the stairs and into his room.

x-x-x-x-x

He sat outside the house, making sure that all the cars were accounted for. The porch light was on, for once. He wonders if Max is home, they never leave the light on for him.

He pulled the photo out of his glove box, wishing he'd been brave enough to cut off the half with Steve. But knew better than to have potential evidence against him in Neil's house.

He put it gently in his pocket once he got out of the car. He's late for dinner if the time is right.

With a deep breath he made quick work of getting inside. He walked purposefully into the kitchen, noticing that he was the only one missing.

“Hey Billy, I put a plate in the microwave for you. If you're hungry.”

He gave Susan a small nod, and smiled. “Susan, I, I have something for you.”

He pulled the photo out of his pocket and handed it to her, she took it gently from him.

She glanced down at the photo and then over at Max, and she had a smile that Billy had never seen before.

“Max, you, you look so happy!” She turned to Billy, smile still on her face, “Thank you so much! I'll put it on the fridge, after dinner. Thank you.”

He didn't look at his father, simply walked around the table and opened the microwave, taking out his plate of food. He sat down across from Max, rounding out the small, four-sided table. She was staring at him as if he'd done her wrong.

"Neil, honey, doesn't Max look beautiful!"

Susan held up the photo for Neil to see. The older man simply glanced down at the photo, then over to his son, and then his attention was back on his meal.

"Stunning. Who's that boy in the picture with you, Maxine?"

Billy shoveled a bite of mashed potatoes into his mouth.

"That's Steve, uh Harrington. He's the one that's usually babysitting us at Dustin's when his mom's out on a date, or working late."

Billy didn't have to be looking at Neil to know that the shift in his posture was at the mere mention of a boy doing what he deemed a girl's job.

"He's a babysitter?"

"Yeah, what's the big deal? He's actually pretty good at keeping us out of trouble. Helps us with our homework, makes sure we're all home by curfew. He's great at that respect and responsibility stuff you're always going on about."

Billy gently set his utensils down; he knew, deep down *he knew*, that photo would stir up some kind of shitstorm with his old man. It's like he couldn't just let others be happy for once. Billy knows that he did right by Susan and getting her that photo of Max caught in that moment. But he also knows that it's better now for that photo of Steve Harrington to be still attached with Max rather than found hidden in his room.

"He teach you it's okay to talk to your parents like that?"

Max looked up at Neil, "Seeing as his parents would rather ignore his existence and travel the world, rather than actually be home and be parents to their only child, no, *no sir*, I don't think he knows how to

teach us how to talk to parents because his suck.”

Billy was pleading for Max to just shut up, not rile the beast.

“You mean that young man is always home alone? We should invite him over for dinner, who knows if that poor thing’s eating enough. He does look a little thin here.”

Billy thinks Susan’s poorly played naive tendencies are her best and worst trait.

Neil roughly threw his knife and fork down onto his mostly clear plate; they were all in for it tonight.

“Fine, *dear* , you want to add another mouth to feed at our table, you be sure to pick up that tab. I’d like to meet a young man who thinks *babysitting children* is a suitable profession. He in your class?”

“No, sir. He’s a senior.”

Billy didn’t want to make eye-contact because he knew the next question that was going to be asked.

“Do you know him?”

Billy schooled his entire body into indifference; he tried. He shrugged, “One of my English courses, he sits a few rows away, but other than that I don’t really see or interact with him.”

“You play on the same basketball team.”

FUCK YOU MAX! Billy wishes he could yell that out loud. Throw his plate of semi-cold food at her. Billy did not miss the look Neil gave the both of them, he and Max.

“Ladies, if you’ll excuse me and my son. We’ll be in the cellar.”

Neil had taken six steps before he stopped, waiting on Billy. Billy stood, moved to the trash so he could empty his plate and then he rinsed it in the sink. He noticed Max look between them and he tried to warn her with a quick shake of his head. Please don’t say whatever it is your big mouth is going to say.

“You going to beat the shit out of him again? Or are we not supposed to know about that?”

Billy watched Susan deflate in her seat.

Watched as Max looked up at Neil, who was starting to breath heavily through his nose.

Watched as the older man took a step towards her with fists clenching and unclenching at his side.

“Maxine, what I do with my son is none of your business. *Ever* . Is that understood?”

She looked up at him, scoot her chair back and stood up, turning to face him.

“It’s *Max* , and it is my business. He’s my brother, and doesn’t deserve half the shit you throw at him on a daily basis! I’ve seen *real* monsters, you *don’t* scare me anymore.”

Notes for the Chapter:

i know things between max and billy seem a little odd...i'll touch that as well....next chapter....which will continue right from this moment....

he did forgive her...they may or may not have had a chat one night...

16. Coward

Billy saw Neil's arm raise before Susan could yell, *Maxine* , and he dove between the two of them, not caring about the table full of dinner dishes he'd knocked to the floor.

"NO!"

He hadn't even known he'd yelled as he jumped across the table, clambering to his feet, to put himself between Max and Neil.

The old man looked between the two step-siblings; Billy was reminded of the anger on his face the night Max snuck out. At least he wasn't crying this time.

"*You were going to hit me?* Do you know that one of my best friends is the *Chief of Police's* daughter? I have his *personal* number. I know where he lives! Don't you *ever* try to hit me again!"

She'd stepped out from behind Billy, standing beside him.

Neil looked like he wanted to call her out on her bluff, but the look Billy was giving him let him know she was speaking truth.

Billy watched as she walked over the phone hanging on the wall by the fridge.

The three of them could only watch as she picked the phone up and dialed a number she seemed to know by heart.

"Hi El, it's me, Max. Is Jim home?"

Billy felt his insides freeze when you heard the distinct male voice speak into the phone.

"Hey Jim, it's Max. My step-dad just tried to beat me and my brother."

Billy's breathing starting to quicken, like he couldn't get enough air with each breath.

“Yes, he was very threatening. *He usually is .*”

His eyes moved back to his dad.

Livid didn't even come close to the emotions radiating from that man.

Billy slowly edged himself, so he kept himself between Neil and Max as she gave Jim their address.

She hung the phone up and looked over Billy's shoulder to Neil, “He's on his way.”

The next few moments were like slow-motion in Billy's memories. There was a slap to someone's face--no one had seen Susan move. Nor had they ever expected that *she'd* hit her own daughter. That's all Neil needed to shove Billy backwards, until his back hit a wall.

Billy couldn't concentrate on the words that Neil or Susan were saying, or yelling. His focus was on Max who was staring in shock at her mother. Her right hand pressed against her cheek.

“You did this! You taught her to be this disrespectful you ungrateful brat. I should've just left you behind when we moved. A faggot and a coward!”

Max turned and ran, she ran down the hall and slammed her door shut and Billy heard the lock click. Smart girl.

Both Neil and Susan had their attention on him. He'd made his peace with Max. He made sure she knew it too. He knows that's why she stood up to Neil. And knowing what he knows now about that night she snuck out, he believes there isn't much that fiery redhead is afraid of.

Neil doesn't deserve her fear.

“Sure you want to give the Chief evidence?”

This would be the only time that Billy would have to be mouthy.

Neil turned towards Susan, “Get me a beer, and have him clean up

this mess. Don't help him."

Billy watched as she obediently followed his order. She walked over to the fridge and pulled out a can, cracking it open for him before handing it over. She stared down at the floor, the mess scattered about.

"You know where the supplies are."

Billy snorted. He wasn't going to do anything.

Both of them waited till they heard the television turn on and the sound of the evening news fill the silence of the house.

"I appre--"

"Don't talk to me! You just slapped your daughter in the face because she was standing up to your second husband. Who was the one who protected her? It sure as hell wasn't you."

Billy turned and walked off. He went out the steps and lit a cigarette. He wondered if he could tell Steve any of this. Hell, the way those nerds communicate with their radios he probably already knows.

He went through for sticks before he saw the flashing lights before they turned up his street. A little grateful it was only lights, no sirens. The lights would draw enough attention.

He watched as the truck parked on the curb and as a very tall, thick man climbed out. That was the guy at the game night. The one who was helping one of the kids.

"Evening Officer."

"Did he touch you?"

"Shoved me around a little."

"Where's Max?"

"In her room. She locked herself in there, but given her track record I can't say for certain if she's still in there. Uh sir, you should know,

her mom slapped her, for uh, for calling you.”

The uniformed man looked down at Billy and nodded towards the house, “Door open?”

“Yeah, but I’ll lead you in. Let them know you’re here.”

He stomped out his cigarette and turned towards the house.

Billy led the man right into the living room where Neil was still sitting in his chair, beer in hand, watching the news. Totally unphased that Hawkins’ Chief of Police was standing in his living room because his step-daughter had called him *at home* .

“Good evening folks, name’s Jim, Jim Hopper. I haven’t had the pleasure of introducing myself to you, but my kid sure does adore your girl, Max. Care to tell me about that phone call I got a bit ago?”

Billy watched as Jim looked around the house, looking towards the kitchen where they could see Susan scrubbing at the floor.

“Oh come on, surely *someone* in this house must know why I get a phone call in the middle of dinner time with my kid, to tell me that her step-father tried to hit not only her, but her step-brother as well.”

Billy could tell Jim was humoring Neil for only a moment. He slowly moved out of the room and went to Max’s door.

He knocked quietly and heard her move towards it.

“It’s me, Hopper’s here.”

He heard the door open and she peered over his shoulder, trying to get a glimpse down the hall.

He stepped back to let her pass; she bolted down the hall.

“Hop! I don’t want to stay here, I don’t feel safe, and I don’t think Billy does either.”

Billy approached slowly, taking in the scenes of Susan crying into her hands on the floor in the kitchen, his dad still blatantly ignoring

Jim's presence in his own house, and to Hopper glancing between the two kids.

"I'll call Flo, have her take the two of you over to Joyce's, or the Sinclair's. Mr. Sinclair works some of these cases in the city."

The name Sinclair got Neil's attention, and it did not go unnoticed by anyone.

"In fact, if you don't mind, I'll give Mr. Sinclair a call right now, see if we can't drop you kids off tonight."

Everyone heard the scoff come from the chair.

"Billy, where's a phone I can use?"

He pointed to the one beside the couch, which would put Jim in Neil's direct line of sight. He watched him cross the room and pick the phone up to dial the Sinclair household phone number.

"Good evening, Kara, I hate to bother you, especially when I know you're just finishing up dinner with the kids, but does Jacob have a moment? I have an incident I need his expertise on. And I might need you to offer your renowned hospitality to some kids."

Billy kept his eyes on his father, who was glaring at Jim as he spoke into the phone.

"Your boy Lucas knows the daughter, Maxine Mayfield."

Billy could hear Mrs. Sinclair say something loud in Jim's ear, but he couldn't make it out.

"Hello Jacob, it's Jim. Yeah, I know I never have any good phone calls this time of the evening."

Billy could hear a male's voice, even from where he was standing. His gaze never left Neil's body sitting rigid in the recliner.

"Yes, names are Maxine Mayfield, and William Hargrove; both minors. Their relation is step-siblings, second marriages for both parents."

Billy didn't even know that Jim knew his given name, but if he thought about it, nobody just named their kid Billy.

"I'll have them pack their things and be on our way. I should pull up with them in about thirty minutes or so. Thanks again, tell Kara I owe her."

As soon as the phone was cradled in its receiver, Neil looked over at Jim Hopper and sized him up.

"I wasn't aware that you could just come into someone's home and remove their children."

"I can when it's a matter of child welfare, and from what I've seen and heard around town, you're not exactly father of the year material, Mr. Hargrove. I don't take kindly to adults who take advantage of their power over the children in their care, blood-relation or not. Children are gifts to be cherished not beaten."

Neil crushed the can in his hand and stood up, squaring his shoulders, still ending up at least a head shorter than Jim, but didn't back down.

"You can take the girl, but Billy's not going anywhere."

Jim gently rested his right hand on his hip, near where his gun sat in its holster, "All due *respect*, Mr. Hargrove, he's a minor and as one child has explicitly expressed, neither of them feel safe in this home, so I'll be removing them *both* from your care until you and the missus, can verify that you're *suitable* guardians of your children."

Billy watched Neil's eyes dart down to the gun before meeting Jim's gaze head-on.

"I'll need the proper paperwork before I allow him to leave."

"Are you *interfering*, Mr. Hargrove? Because I'm not below using force if necessary to subdue you into allowing children, who feel threatened by you, leave an unsafe environment."

Billy had *never* seen his father falter before. Neil had always been so sure of himself. So full of bullshit confidence that here, right now, he

realized that his father was nothing more than a bully and a coward.

The man who'd beat him every now and then, leaving bruises that lasted a little too long, caused him to piss pink for a few days, and who belittled his very existence, was nothing more than one of the names he'd constantly call his own son--a coward.

"Billy, help your sister gather your things. I'll stay right here while you guys gather whatever you need."

Jim had looked away from his father, knowing just what kind of man he was dealing with. Billy was frozen for a moment--was this really happening? Was he really going to get out from under Neil's thumb?

Max tugged on his arm, grabbing his wrist and pulling him down the hall towards her room.

"I have extra duffle bags in my closet if you need them."

She'd started pulling clothes out of her dresser, shoving them haphazardly into a large duffle she'd pulled from underneath her bed. When she noticed he hadn't moved from the doorway she pointed to the closet, "Billy, it's okay."

She realized she'd have to physically shove the bags into his hands in order for him to get a move on. She did just that.

"Come on, the upside to this, you get to meet Erica. She's going to eat you alive."

"Who the hell is Erica?"

Max grinned, going back to shoving clothes and shoes into her bags, "Lucas' little sister."

He nodded and turned and walked back across the house to his own room. He stood in the doorway and looked around--what was actually worth saving in here? It only took him three boxes to pack up his old room before they moved. Neil considered him old enough to take care of his own belongings, which included clothes, and jackets.

When he was done shoving things into the duffle bag--one, one single bag, he realized that everything else could be replaced. He grabbed a few of the books he had hidden in the back of his closet, and his cassette case. If he needed money he could always sell them.

It wasn't until he and Max were sitting in the back of Jim's truck, bags tucked between them, that the reality of what had just happened hit him. He could feel his chest tighten and his breaths become shallow.

"Billy, it's okay. He can't hurt you anymore."

He felt Max's smaller hand rest on his left, the one holding onto the duffle bag that contains his whole life.

He choked out a sob. Feeling his eyes burn with tears that ignored the threat to stay back. So he let them fall.

Max's hand stayed on top of his the whole ride over.

Jim didn't say a word.

When they turned on to Maple, Jim stopped at the mouth of the road, "Kara and Jacob are *good* people. I learned a lot about the kind of kid I *thought* you were from the kids, but from what I saw this evening, you being *you* makes a hell of a lot more sense having met your old man. Not all parents are bad people. The Sinclairs are a kind family, a loving family, it might not be what you're used to, both of you if I'm being honest, but if you need anything, you give me a call. I don't care what time it is, you understand me?"

He'd turned around to face them, waiting for them both to acknowledge what he'd said.

Max nodded.

Billy nodded. He couldn't really say anything to that. It's not like he was wrong.

He wiped at his eyes, rubbing his face, knowing that him crying wouldn't go unnoticed.

When the truck pulled up out front of the modest looking house, the porch light was on and the door was open, a woman standing there, *waiting* for them.

Billy watched as she turned and yelled something into the house and moments later he saw the boy, Lucas, and who he assumed was Mr. Sinclair come out and head towards the truck.

Max climbed out and ran around the side of the truck and all but tackled Lucas into a hug. A hug he was prepared for if his returning grip on her was anything to judge.

Billy slowly climbed out of the truck, grabbing the three duffle bags, and Max's backpack--four bags that contained all their worldly possessions.

"You must be Billy, I'm Jacob. My wife Kara's up at the door, and if you look close enough you'll notice Erica being the nosy busy-body she is on the stairs. Would you like help with those bags?"

Billy shook his head, expecting the man to just take them anyway. He hoped he didn't look startled when Mr. Sinclair nodded and stepped back.

"Son, let the girl catch her breath. It's good to see you Max, just unfortunate it's under these circumstances."

She smiled over Lucas' shoulder at Jacob Sinclair. Billy wondered how often she disobeyed his warning to stay away from the Sinclair kid to warrant that kind of familiarity with his dad.

"Let's get you guys settled inside. Billy, the den downstairs is set up for you. Max, you're on the trundle in Erica's room. Unless you guys want to be together downstairs, that's fine too. Whatever will make you feel the most comfortable."

She let go of Lucas and looked over at Billy, "I think together for tonight's best."

Billy gave her a small nod.

"No problem. Lucas go grab the blankets and pillows from your sister's room. Tell her to be nice or she'll be forced to stay upstairs."

“Ten bucks she’s downstairs with us when we wake up in the morning, staring Billy down.”

Billy glanced over at Max who was looking up at Mr. Sinclair. The man smiled down at her and held out his hand, she untangled herself from Lucas and moved over to shake on it.

Lucas darted into the house and disappeared up the stairs Billy could see just off behind the door.

“Hello Max.”

“Hi Ms. Kara.”

Max smiled at Mrs. Sinclair as she made her way into the house going to the right, where Billy assumed were more stairs leading to this den that was set up for him.

“Welcome, Billy.”

Her smile was radiant and warm, and he had no idea how to react to it. She gestured him into the house and he was right, and headed down the stairs to where he could hear Max moving things around. He glanced up, noticed little feet dangling between banisters, then looked up into the face of the one who must be Erica Sinclair. She grinned. He’d never felt threatened by a child before, but something about her calculating stare had him on edge.

“You should’ve made it twenty,” he said to her as he made it to the bottom of the stairs.

Max turned and smiled at him, “I know, but she knows what you did, so she’s equal parts intrigued and terrified of you. It’ll be a test of her bravery if she approaches you while sleeping.”

He offered her her bags and watched as she tossed them to the side.

He knows he should wait until everyone was done bothering them for the evening. He knew Mr. Sinclair had invited the Chief in for a cup of coffee, which was code for getting their facts in order to file paperwork first thing in the morning.

“ *Why* did you do it?”

She froze, clutching the pillow that she was moving to the other side of the fold out bed.

She opened her mouth to say something but they both turned towards the approaching footsteps coming down the stairs.

“Mom tends to go overboard with any kids we house, so if for some reason these blankets and pillows, and the bags of toiletries she’s put together are not enough, *please* , for the sake of *all* our sanities, don’t hesitate to ask her for anything.”

Max smiled at the boy on the stairs with an armful of blankets and pillows.

“You guys are adorable and it’s gross.”

Max threw the pillow in her hands at Billy, who smiled at her. They would talk, but he’d let her have a moment with Lucas.

He walked up the stairs and was grateful that he could actually see the table where the adults were sitting, rather than have to explore a stranger’s house.

The top step creaked under his foot and he found himself looking up at three faces stopped mid-conversation.

“What can I get for you sweetie?”

He stumbled a step, not prepared for the kindness that he’d been warned about. He wonders if Mrs. Sinclair knows what Billy did to her son.

“I smelled coffee.”

She got up and gestured him to follow her into the kitchen, “Come on, I’ll get you a cup.”

He followed her.

She was holding out a mug for him and pointing towards the coffee

maker on the counter.

Before he could take the offered mug he looked her in the eye, "I'm sorry, for what I did to your son."

Her eyes softened and she put the mug down on the counter beside her.

"Your father's not the first *white* man to give me and mine grief over the color of our skin. From what I've heard from Jim so far, you were only trying to protect Max in your own way, from what you, yourself, had to deal with on a semi-regular basis from him.

"Baby, if I let every person who disliked me because of the body I was born in, I'd be a miserable old hag and frankly, I don't have time to waste on people who aren't worth a second thought. I don't want nor need that kind of negativity in my life.

"Now, I won't say that I wasn't too pleased when Dustin told me about the happenings that evening, because Lucas sure as hell wasn't going to admit to anything. However, *comma* , when Max piped up with the fact that you'd been sent around to find her because your father was going on about respect and responsibility, I knew the kind of man she was living with.

"I'd told Jacob a few times, when you, her mother, or the one occasion the man himself, picked her up from the arcade, well, I'd kept my distance. I wanted to see how he would act in public towards her and my son. I don't know what he said to her once she got in his truck, but the look he was giving them while they were saying goodbye, I wish she'd called Jim a hell of a lot sooner.

"I don't care that you think or feel you deserved anything that man did to you, *because let me tell you something Billy Hargrove, you are not your father* , and as long as you are in *my care* , I will tell you that every single day. Until you believe it. You are not him, baby, and I'm sorry that he's ever had the *chance* to make you think it."

She'd pulled him into her arms the moment his eyes watered. Would he ever stop crying tonight?

He can't remember the last time he was held like this in someone's arms. Let alone a *mother*'s embrace.

"Now, what do you take in your coffee?"

17. My Fault

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm going to try to get better at responding to y'all's comments, 'cause the love y'all have for this astounds me in the best kinds of ways!

i'm on a weekend getaway so i'll be MIA until sunday night, most likely monday evening after work.

i just didn't want to leave y'all hanging all weekend when it's my usual time for updates!

for real though, y'all's love for this fic gives me the warm fuzzies and i dig it some kind of ridiculous!

Steve was working on some history homework when he heard the phone ring, he glanced at the clock, it was almost nine, who would be calling this late? He knew John would get it and if it was important he'd come upstairs to get him.

He and John had had a chat when he'd gotten home from his outing with Billy.

"Come on kiddo, let's go in and you can tell me all about it."

It took Steve a few more minutes to simply stare in the direction Billy's car had disappeared in. He really hadn't meant to lead him on. Had he led him on though?

John put his arm around Steve's shoulder and directed him into the house and then to living room.

"Need a beer?"

"What? Uh, no, no thanks."

"You know I don't care; I guarantee you could outdrink me if high school memories serve me well."

Steve smiled, "I uh, I haven't really been to many parties this year. I kind of outgrew the whole scene."

"Well, look at you, growing up without telling me!"

Steve returned John's genuine smile.

"I think, I think he likes me too much to just be my friend. I think I hurt his feelings."

John sat down on the opposite end of the couch, turning his body to face Steve, who had plopped down rather ungracefully on the other end.

"Anyone with eyes can see the way that kid stares you down. It's either because he wants to kill you or fuck you, and given that he hasn't tried the former but only the one time, which he regrets, we can make a sure bet that it's the latter."

Steve felt his ears burn in embarrassment.

"Oh, am I not supposed to say things like that to you? I'm not your mom, buddy. Plus, I know where Billy's coming from. I've had my share of crushes on straight boys. Thought that I could just be their friend."

"It's hard putting your feelings on hold like that. Especially when they're such great guys. My friend Evan, during basic training, man, I tell you, I fell head-over-heels for that kid in two hours. He's got that artist's soul. He's a genuinely good person, and he never told a soul about my drunk attempt to kiss him one night on leave."

"He turned his head so my kiss landed on his cheek, and then he looked me dead in the eye and told me, 'John, I respect your feelings, but you need to respect mine. We're friends. Only friends. You're a great guy, and the one who lands you is going to be one lucky son of a bitch, but it's not me.' And that was that."

"He wasn't the first straight boy that caught my interest, but I'd since figured out that that's going to be the story of my life. I'd heard of the Grove from a few friends I'd made on some leaves. I had to be very

discreet. The moment I met Rodney though, I knew I was a goner.”

Steve felt warm at the fond look on John’s face. He loved their love. They got after each other plenty, but no matter how annoyed they were with each other, they never went to bed angry, nor without a goodnight kiss.

“He was wearing this god awful orange puffy jacket, and had glasses, standing in front of one of our lecture halls for training for one of our deployment trainings. Civilian clothing wasn’t an odd sight, we had quite a few professors that weren’t in any of the forces. Then the damn fool had to open his mouth and reprimanded the poor kid two spaces in front of me, and I knew I was smitten.

“I had to know him. I had to know what kind of person thought they were the smartest person in the room, and let everyone else know they were stupid in comparison. I did enjoy the first time I threw him off by understanding what he was talking about. He thought nobody in our class would be able to keep up, and when I gave him the correct answer--the only one who raised their hand to even give an answer.

“We had coffee that afternoon after class, to discuss my flyboy stupidity hiding my MENSA brain. He made me take the test. I solved it in less time than he did and he didn’t speak to me for I think two days after that, but once he did, it was pretty much to ask me to spend the rest of our lives together.

“So, you going to tell me how your chat went? And dinner?”

Steve tossed his head back and groaned, “He’s pretty. Like really, really, stupidly pretty. There’s no use in me denying the fact that I think he’s pretty. I can admit that.”

“Okay, so what are having problems admitting to?”

“The things he was saying to me at the table, like, how if it were a real date, the things he’d do, and I, I could imagine all of it happening, with him. And, as I sat there and watched him eating like a starving lunatic, I may have realized that I don’t think I’d mind going on a date with him. Giving him a try.”

He heard rushed footsteps running up the stairs, and John calling out

his name. His door opened a moment later, “Dustin’s on the phone, says it’s a party emergency. He sounds pretty frantic, uh, more than his usual amped up demeanor.”

Shit. Steve scrambled to his feet and ran down the hall to his parents room where they had a phone.

“Hey Buddy, what’s going on?”

“Steve! Shit, Steve. El called Mike who called Will who called me, and then as soon as Will radioed me my phone rang, it was Lucas. Max called Hopper on Billy’s dad! He almost hit her but Billy got in between them, protecting her. They’re at Lucas’ until his dad can figure out what to do with them.”

“What?”

Steve wasn’t comprehending what Dustin had just rushed out.

“I need you to take a deep breath and explain that to me again, slowly, Dustin.”

“Billy’s dad tried to beat the shit out of him and Max. Max called Hopper who came and took her and Billy away to Lucas’ house.”

“Are they okay?”

“*Are they okay?* Were you dropped on your head as a baby? Jesus, Steve, their dad hit them and they were removed from their house because of it, how do you think they’re doing?”

“Dustin, Dustin, calm down pal, I need you to take some deep breaths--that’s good. Give me like four more big ones. Okay. I’m sorry that I asked you a stupid question. No hospital needed, right? For either of them?”

“Lucas said they seemed okay. But Max had a mark on her cheek, and Billy apparently was crying, like a lot. Like how my mom cries at some shows she watches.”

“Thank you for letting me know. Are, are you, are the rest of you guys okay?”

Dustin's hesitation didn't go unnoticed. The kid hardly ever shut up.

"Talk to me Dustin, what's up?"

"He was out with you. That's why he was late for their family dinner. Mom ran us out to pick up a to-go order from the diner. She said she saw you and him sitting in a booth, talking and smiling. Wait, were you on, on a, on a *date* with him?"

Steve sighed, "Buddy, you're deflecting, what are you trying to say here, it's *my fault* that he and Max got beat up?"

"Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, NO! I just, I remembered mom mentioning that she saw you guys, but, wait, I don't know. Okay, I'm just passing along information Lucas gave me. They'll be there for a few days at minimum. Kara says no visitors for the first forty-eight hours; helps them settle in more easily without a steady flow of people in and out of the house."

Well that crushed Steve's immediate desire to go over to the Sinclair house and check on Billy, and Max.

"Do the rest of you guys need anything? You can all come here if you need to get out of the house. You know that, right?"

Dustin sighed, "Will told us stories about his dad, and like, we know that Jonathan and Joyce took the brunt of his worst, but Will was still old enough to understand that something was going on. He heard things. And we, we decided back then, that we'd always say something, speak up, if, if one of us experienced something like that. We, uh, we, when we told Max about that part of being a member of The Party, she, she paled a little.

"Like she, like she wanted to say something, and she kind of did, but she said that kind of stuff doesn't happen to her. Like it happens to someone but not her. Oh my god, do you think she meant Billy? Steve! Why didn't you tell us your boyfriend was being abused?"

"Whoa, calm down! She was probably scared to say anything! And he's not my boyfriend."

"But he wants to be, so what's the problem?"

“I’m going to hang up now.”

“I’m sorry! Okay, I just, you know how I get when I worry, and needless to say, I’m worried.”

“Tell you what, tell the rest of the guys that, after the forty-eight hour isolation is lifted, we’ll ask Mrs. Sinclair if I can bring you guys over to see Max. I’ll even offer to bring dinner or something.”

“Steve, you and I both know that Kara Sinclair would rather make us all dinner than have you bring something out of the goodness of your heart. Those are her words. She’s said them to me before. They’re in good hands. I promise. She’s make you feel horrible for even suggesting something other than her own home cooking.”

Steve hadn’t actually formally met Mrs. Sinclair, but from how Lucas and Dustin talk about her, he knows a losing battle when he hears one.

“We have a plan, I’ll pick you up in the morning, okay? Thanks for calling me and letting me know.”

X-X-X-X-X

After dropping Dustin off, Steve made quick work of going to find Mrs. Johnson before homeroom. She’d looked a little startled to see him out of breath from running around the school, but once he’d said Billy’s name she ushered him down the hall into the upstairs Teacher’s Lounge, and closed the door.

“Is he okay?”

Steve shrugged, “I, I don’t know. My information is coming from a secondhand source. One of the kids I babysit, he’s best friends with Lucas, whose parents are the ones taking in Max and Billy. Like, I, I know he alluded to things in his letters about his dad being an asshole, but to be physically abusive, I feel like I should’ve noticed something.”

He hated the pity in her eyes, “Don’t go down that road Steve Harrington. You’re doing what you can. The offer to take the kids over after school tomorrow, sounds very good to me. I’ll, I’ll see if I

can talk to Brenda down in the office, because Billy will most likely have had a phone call come from the police station if he's been rehomed. If I can get anything other than what you've already told me, I'll fill you in."

He nodded.

"How are you doing?"

"Me? I'm, well, you know, now that I actually think about how to answer that, I could be a hell of a lot better."

"If you need another day to yourself, you can hide out in my classroom. I can have you grade quizzes or something. Just an offer. Billy isn't the only one who's been going through some shit at home."

"Thanks Mrs. Johnson."

She nodded and led him back to her room. She set him up off to the side of her desk at a small table and stacks of papers and a red felt-tip pen.

Steve allowed himself to get lost in the monotony of checking over quizzes.

18. Sad Attempt At A Smile

“You are going to allow these *children* to get a good night's sleep before you ask them *anything*. Do you understand me gentlemen?”

Billy sipped at the perfectly made cup of coffee, starrng over the rim at the three adults who are going to *help* him and Max.

He watched as Mrs. Sinclair gave her husband and the police chief a look, and both looked sheepishly back at her. They both said a quick *yes, ma'am* and they finished their own cups of coffee.

The Chief stood, “I'm going to need both of them to come down tomorrow, say no later than nine?”

Billy thought he looked like he was a child trying to ask for permission. Mrs. Sinclair looked at him for a moment, “Jim Hopper, I will bring them by the station *after* they've slept, had a good breakfast, and showered. I make *no* promises to be there by nine. Tomorrow *we* work on *their* time.”

Billy had finished his cup during the Chief's question, but couldn't quite bring himself to put it down; he'd felt like his cup was a barrier. If he kept it up, the adults would leave him alone. Except now they were looking at him, as if he's supposed to say something.

“I'm sorry, did you say something?”

Mrs. Sinclair just smiled at him, “Do you and Max have a favorite breakfast you like to eat?”

He felt his chest tightening, like right before you cry. He just wanted to stop feeling everything he was. He definitely had had enough of crying in front of everyone. “I know Max loves pancakes. With bananas and chocolate chips in them.”

“And what about *you* ?”

He was taken back, yet again, by her *mother* tendencies. He's not sure what his favorite breakfast is because he's had to fend for himself for so long it was easier to just grab an apple, or toast.

“Oh, baby, I, I'm going to make you a whole breakfast spread, and you tell me what you like and don't like.”

“You, you uh, don't have to do that. I uh, usually just eat toast.”

She stared at him, and for a moment, he was reminded of Jane staring through his soul.

“I think it's a shame that you don't have a favorite breakfast. It's the most important meal of the day. It sets the tone for the day. Now, do you want to go back on downstairs, or grab a shower?”

He hated sleeping with wet hair, “Bed. Ma'am.”

She held her hand out, gesturing for his mug, “Honey, call me Kara. Don't you, or Max, worry about what time to get up in the morning. You're both excused from school for at least two days. We can go to the store after we finish at the station, grab you two whatever you need.”

Billy just nodded and turned and walked back the direction he had come from. When he was on the bottom most set of stairs he heard the adults start talking again. He also heard Max and the Sinclair boy talking to each other in hushed voices. He knows they heard him coming down the stairs.

“Alright lovebirds, I'm coming in, so make room for Jesus.”

Max was flipping him the bird the moment the two of them came into his view. They were sitting cross-legged, facing each other on the bed. Sinclair's left hand was resting on Max's right knee, fiddling with the tear there--the frayed edges.

Billy waved her off and headed to his bag, mostly to check and see if he actually grabbed something he could sleep in. Otherwise it was going to be an uncomfortable night in his jeans. He dug through his bag and realized that neither of them grabbed toothbrushes or anything like that.

“Your toiletry bags are by the stairs. My mom thought of everything you could possibly need and it's in there. Trust me. This, unfortunately, isn't the first time we've housed kids from, well, bad

situations.”

“Thanks Lucas, tell your mom I said good night. I’ll see you before you go to school tomorrow.”

She smiled at him; Billy doesn’t ever remember seeing her smile like that. Not even back in California.

Lucas climbed off the bed and waved awkwardly at the foot of the stairs before ascending them out of sight.

“How’s loverboy?”

“He’s fine. How’s yours?”

Billy felt his ears burn, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You get moony eyes whenever Steve’s in your vicinity. It’s gross. Does he like you back? Dustin said his mom saw you two at the diner earli--oh. Shit, I’m sorry, Billy, I didn’t mean to, I’m an asshole!”

He froze in shock. Mostly at how little everyone seemed to *not* care that he had an apparently obvious crush on Steve Harrington.

“Look, shitbird, if anyone’s the asshole, it’s Neil, got it? I chose to go out with Steve. I chose to be late to family dinner. I really did think your mom would love that photo Byers captured of you and Harrington.”

Max looked at him, almost as if she was trying to read him. He was a little uncomfortable.

“It still doesn’t make it okay that he does that to you! How long has he been doing that? Before we moved? Be-before I told them about seeing you with Kevin?”

Billy could see her getting worked up, so he walked over to her and put his hands on her shoulders, hating the minute flinch she gave at his touch.

“Look, Neil’s known about my preference long before you and your mom ever entered our lives. He thinks he can beat it out of me, but

nothing's worked so far. Not even moving us nearly across the country to the middle of nowhere. I told you the other night, we're good."

She sighed and wrapped her arms around him, and he felt her start to shake--she was crying. Max doesn't cry. At least he's never seen her do it. He might have heard her sniffles a few times, especially after the move, but to see tears fall, he's never.

"Hey, hey, shh, we're okay. We're *safe* here. I'm sorry I couldn't block you, your mom from hitting you. That's something I wish you never had to experience at the hand of your own parent."

She removed her arms and wiped at her face; "It doesn't make it okay for you to be taking the brunt of Neil's anger! I'd heard him a few times, with the yelling, but I've only ever *seen* him hit you once. That was last week. How, how he looked at you when I was telling him about Steve, to see if he meant anything to you, I saw that rage there. It was the same look on his face when I had snuck out to grab a glass of water.

"He'd had you by the hair and was hitting you in the stomach with his other hand. Billy, why, why would you *let* him do that to you? You're stronger than him! I've seen your workout regiment. I wanted to say something that night, but I, I didn't know if he'd turn that on me. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Neil's always been a shitty dad."

She looked up at him, "What's going to happen to us?"

He knew. Of course he knew what happens to kids who get taken from their homes. He'd had a few friends disappear overnight back out west. The rumors were the worst part about their leaving--nobody knew the truth.

He moved and sat down on the bed beside her, "Ms. Kara is a force to be reckoned with, I am learning. If she can make it so, we'll stay together. At least until I age out, and turn 18. Uh, then I'm shit out of luck, kid. I'm on my own, which isn't anything new for me. Or until Neil and Susan can prove that they're actually changed folks, seen the

error of their ways.”

Max furrowed her brows, “I, I don’t want to go back to them. Not, not if she’s taking his side. Billy, my mom’s *never* hit me before! Ever.”

Billy could see her eyes watering, and felt his doing the same.

“Max, I, I’m so sorry you had to experience this. You, you have no idea how hard I tried to keep it from you.”

She sniffled and looked into his eyes, “My, my mom’s never hit *you* has she?”

Billy cast his eyes to the floor.

“Don’t lie to me!”

He shook his head, “No. She uh, she’s witnessed Neil a few times. She just stands there and uh, turns her head away like,”

“Like if she doesn’t *see* it, it’s not *really* happening?”

Billy felt his heart clench at the tone of her voice. For knowing that her mother ignores that kind of behavior in someone who’s supposed to be the protector, the caregiver, and raise a child.

He didn’t have words so he nodded.

She nodded too.

“My, my dad would get loud, kind of like Neil when he drinks, and um, I’d been in the bathroom one night he’d come home late from going out with his work buddies. He was completely messed up, like not just drinking messed up.

“I, I watched through a crack in the door before darting to my room, uh, she watched him come in the house, leave the front door wide open and go right to the kitchen, where I heard him open a can of beer. She closed her eyes and pressed herself against the wall while he moved about.

“He stumbled down the hall, the opposite end of the house, to their room. And she just stood there. I heard him yell her name and she flinched like he’d hit her or something. I quickly ran to my room and locked the door. I covered my head with my pillow to block out their screaming match. Turns out we both won the shitty jackpot of awful dads.”

He tried to return her sad attempt at a smile.

“You know, for what it’s worth Billy, I, I’m glad it’s you here with me. I, I don’t know what I’d do if Mom was with someone else and this happened. I wouldn’t have known it was okay to call Jim and ask him for help. I, I knew he’d come. If, if we were still in Cali, I, I’m not sure I’d know it was okay to call. Let alone know someone who’d actually care. That’s why I said what I did to Neil. I knew he was riled up, he’d been ranting and raging about your tardiness long before you were actually late.

“He’d started to make some threatening remarks, but Mom just nodded in my direction, like, to remind him that I was still present and to watch what he was saying because of my delicate little ears. It didn’t matter in the end, did it? He tried to hit me and she actually *did* .”

He immediately pulled her into his arms as she let out a sob.

“I’m not, I’m not going anywhere okay? I’ll be right here.” His voice was wet with his sorrow. Strangled with his devastation that Max had to actually live with this. And choked with his own feelings on the events that happened earlier tonight.

He’s not sure how long they sat there, with her curled into his chest and his arms wrapped around her. He’d heard her sobs turn into sniffles and into a light snore.

He didn’t want to wake her, but he tried as gently as he could to lay her down on the other side of the bed. If only he’d had half of her strength when he was her age, the things he could’ve done by now.

He’s never been grateful, per se, until this moment, that he’s had to deal with the bullshit he has, because tonight, tonight he and Max

became siblings. There would be no more correcting someone when they asked after her brother, or his sister--no more step- before their tag. He gained someone who needed him the same way he needed her.

They don't know what a *normal* family is like, but they were going to learn together. He'd make damn sure of that.

When he'd finally gotten his arm from underneath her, she'd made a sound, and he quickly put his hand in her hair, stroking fingers through the long, red strands. She settled instantly.

x-x-x-x-x

Billy jolted awake and took in the very unfamiliar surroundings. He didn't recognize anything currently in the room he awoke in. He sat up and looked around and jumped when his eyes caught sight of the figure sitting on the bottom step, staring at him.

"Fucking hell, kid, warn a guy next time!"

He watched a little eyebrow raise, as if to taunt him and call him an idiot.

"You look like a boy that knows about hair, with that bird's nest on top of your head."

"You must be the charming Erica Sinclair I've heard so much about. You terrify your brother, you know that?"

She grinned, "Of course. Someone's got to let him know he's too big of a nerd to be let out in public."

Billy couldn't help but smile at her.

"I give Max the same warning."

She looked at him and stood up, "There's hope for you yet; breakfast is ready. Max is saying bye to Lucas and Dustin outside. I volunteered to come and get you. You're not so scary drooling on your pillow like a giant baby."

She turned and ran up the stairs and Billy found himself laughing. Girl had balls. He adored her immediately.

He got up and stretched. He shook his legs, sleeping in denim was never comfortable, but if it meant Max slept soundly, he'd do it as often as she needed him to.

He wasn't entirely sold on this being a brother thing, he knows he still has a lot of anger pent up inside--he'd been dealing with Neil since his mom died, but if he was being honest, long before she left him behind.

He heard the front door open and shut and then footsteps go up, must be Max coming in from saying bye to her dorks.

He dug in her bag, grabbed one of her extra hair-ties and pulled his hair out of his face.

He climbed the stairs and headed into the kitchen where he could hear the three ladies talking amongst themselves. He took the open seat, next to the youngest Sinclair.

"See, told you, a boy who knows about hair. Can I practice braiding yours? *She* doesn't let me touch hers."

He looked over at Max, who was grinning around her pancakes, and over at Mrs. Sinclair, who looked like she was slightly amused and mortified at her daughter's behavior.

"When we're done with homework later, knock yourself out."

"Pop owes me ten bucks!"

Mrs. Sinclair laughed and smiled at her daughter, "I'll be sure to remind him when we see him later. You have twenty minutes before your bus comes, eat up and make sure you have all of your things together this time. I don't want another phone call telling me you forgot something. Now, Billy, honey, I told you I was going to make you a little bit of everything. Eat whatever you like, I'll put the rest away and give it to Jim's deputies. Let me know what you do and don't like."

He could only nod. She wasn't kidding about making a little bit of everything.

He put some eggs, scrambled, on his plate. A few pieces of bacon. He stared at the bowls of creamy looking stuff, one had chunks of pink stuff, and one had what looked like ground beef in it.

"My grandmother used to make us those, the one with the pink is chipped beef, and the other one is sausage gravy, goes very good with biscuits. And look at you, preferring scrambled over fried; I'm the same. Jacob loves sunny-side up. I can't get with runny yolk, my mind thinks it's not cooked all the way."

He had no idea what chipped beef was but it was pink, and he didn't trust it, but he did grab a biscuit and some gravy.

He felt his cheeks burn. Mrs. Sinclair was a good mom. He knows this. He's witnessed it in how she runs her house, and how she handles her children.

He doesn't want to think how long it took her to cook all of this, *knowing* that he won't eat some of it. He took a bite of the eggs, and all the emotions he felt last night came back ten-fold. He blinked back tears. He was done crying.

"My, my mom loved sunny-side up. She liked to dip her toast in the runny stuff. She uh, she always made me scrambled eggs though. I, I could never make them taste the same, but yours, yours are very close to what I remember hers tasting like. Thank, thank you, Mrs. Sinclair."

He couldn't meet her eyes because he knew if he did he'd definitely start crying and that's not how he wanted to start his day. Mentioning his own mother wasn't helping with that, but the look on Max's face let him know she appreciated him sharing a little about himself.

They'd never talked about his mom before.

"It's Kara, baby, and if you're not going to dig in with anything else, I'm going to go ahead and pack it up to take with us. Erica,

sweetheart, you best get that behind in gear. Fifteen minutes and counting down before your bus comes.”

Erica rolled her eyes and took another bite of her cereal.

Billy really had no idea how Mrs. Sinclair could tackle what might have been six different breakfasts just to please everyone under her roof.

“Can Billy take me out to the bus?”

Everyone froze and looked at Erica, who was simply sitting at the table, looking back at the three of them, awaiting an answer.

Mrs. Sinclair looked over at Billy and shrugged, “If he wants to, but sweetie, I”

“Great! He wants to. It’s settled. I’ll go grab my backpack from my room.”

She was gone, rushed footsteps echoing through the house.

“If she gets to be too much at all, *at any point* , you say the word, and she’ll be delegated to meal times and after school, in interacting with you.”

Billy felt himself smile, “She’s not a bother. She’s refreshing actually. Reminds me of Max, when our parents first started dating and bringing us around the other.”

“I’m ready, and I promise, mom, I have everything. No phone calls today!”

Erica Sinclair had grabbed Billy by the hand and pulled him after her, down the stairs and out the door.

As soon as the door was shut behind them she let go and turned to face him, hands on her hips.

“Only and final warning, Billy Hargrove. Nobody, and I mean *nobody* , messes with *my brother* but *me* , got it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She raised her brow at him--a near perfect replica of her mother if last night was anything to go by.

“Good. Now, walk me to the end of the driveway and wait with me for my bus to come.”

He glanced down at his feet, “I uh, don’t have my shoes on.”

She waved her arms, gesturing towards the driveway, “Do you see this, it’s *flat ground* , nothing’s going to hurt your precious little feet.”

“You’re a bossy someone.”

She rolled her eyes, “Billy, I thought you were cool.”

“I’m cool. I also like shoes on my feet.”

She laughed at him.

They walked out to the end of the driveway, and Billy had never felt so awkward in his life.

“Do you miss where you’re from?”

He looked down at her and shrugged.

“You ever been to California?”

She nodded, “My aunties live in San Francisco. We’re going to see them next year. We go out every other year to visit.”

“Aunties?”

She raised her brow, “Yes, as in they are together. Got a problem with that?”

He put his hands up and shook his head, “Nope.”

She studied him, probably to see if he’s bluffing; “Is Steve Harrington your boyfriend?”

“Jesus, kid, you can’t just ask people that kind of stuff!”

“That’s not a no, Billy. Does he know you’re here? Did you know he’s bringing the geek squad here after school tomorrow. Something about the guys wanting to see Max. *Oh*, he’s doing it so you guys can see each other too and it wouldn’t be obvious. That’s kind of romantic. It’s gross.”

“You don’t like romance? And he’s not my boyfriend.”

“Then why does everyone call him your boyfriend? Or you his? And love, unless it’s like my mom and dad’s, I want no parts in it. I’ve got time. It’s what my grandma tells me all the time. Nobody is worth sacrificing my future goals and ambitions for.”

They heard the bus before they saw it.

“Your grandma sounds like a smart lady. Love is overrated, but the saying is true, it’s better to have loved and lost than to have never done it at all. Or something ridiculous like that.”

“You’ve been in love?”

The bus was coming towards them, “Tell you what, you can ask me all the questions you want later, when you’re practising on my hair. Deal?”

He held his hand out for her to shake, she immediately grabbed it and shook, “Deal.”

The bus stopped and opened its doors right in front of Erica, she waved and said goodbye to Billy as she climbed up the steps.

He waved back at the bus driver and turned around and faced the house. He took a deep breath and let it out in an exaggerated sigh. He’s not sure how today was going to go.

He also hated that there was a small part of him wished it was tomorrow already, to see Steve. To see if the other boy would even try to talk to him--but would Billy even open up to him about all of this?

As he walked back up to the house he thought that he'd like to think he could be open with Steve about this. He could use a friend. A real one. He'd have to ask and see if he could write to Kev; fill him in on the nightmare that is living under Neil Hargrove's roof.

19. Brand New

Billy hated the stilted conversation on the car ride over to the police station. It definitely wasn't helping his anger at the situation. He'd even noticed Max was curling in on herself. She wasn't the kind of person who usually did that. How much had he really had an impact on her behavior since moving here? Was he really that bad? Had he already turned out like Neil?

"Billy Hargrove, you get out of your head right now. I told you yesterday, and I'll tell you again, you are not your father."

He took a few deep breaths, mostly to keep from his emotions welling up again and manifesting into tears. He felt like a girl on her period, being all emotionally unstable over the littlest things.

He felt Max's hand rest on top of his arm and give it a squeeze.

He turned and looked at her for the first time, since climbing into the backseat of Mrs. Sinclair's car. She had a small smile, and was nodding along to what Mrs. Sinclair had said.

He felt his chest tighten for a completely different reason.

"Ms. Kara, how, uh, how many kids have you and Mr. Jacob, helped?"

Billy didn't miss her clenching her grip tighter on the steering wheel.

"Well, sweetheart, not counting the two of you, probably close to forty-nine kids who came from all kinds of backgrounds and families. The world is full of monsters, and most of them are human."

Billy didn't miss Max's flinch at the word monsters.

He agreed wholeheartedly about most of the monsters in this world being people though.

The streets of L.A. are not kind to anyone. Though it really is a massive suburban neighborhood. He was glad they lived closer to the beach, blocks from the boardwalk. He and Max would easily

skateboard or walk just to get out of the house. They learned early that if seen leaving the house together, and coming back together, Neil and Susan didn't ask as many questions about their whereabouts.

"Since this isn't my first rodeo, I will warn you, that you're going to have to answer some questions that you might not want to answer, and some that might throw you off your game. They have to go over these things, even if some of them seem like they have nothing to do with the situation."

"Are you allowed to be in there with us?"

Billy didn't know that he wants the answer to be yes until he heard Max ask.

"I, if you want me to be there with you, I can be."

Nobody said anything else. Not even as the car pulled up to the police station and Mrs. Sinclair parked.

The three of them, took a collective breath before climbing out of the car.

Billy stared at the building and felt like he couldn't breathe.

Max grabbed his hand and they walked in together, behind Mrs. Sinclair.

She led them to an office at the back of the building.

Billy *hated* the looks between the other officers, and the older lady at the first desk.

This was going to be the longest day of his life.

x-x-x-x-x

"Can you tell us who called the police?"

Billy stared at the Chief.

"Look, kid, I *know* who called, but this is on the record, so the

questions and answers need to be legitimate.”

Billy fought the urge to roll his eyes, but nodded in agreeance.

“Who called the police?”

“Maxine.”

“Can you tell me why you think the police were called?”

Billy looked down at the recorder on the table, “Because Max felt the need to interfere.”

“What do you mean by interfere?”

Billy rubbed his hands over his face and sighed, “Look, my old man’s always had a bit of an anger problem, and I took a lot of the brunt of it. I deliberately chose to be late to family dinner because I knew it was going to garner a reaction and I thought, might as well go big before I go home.”

Billy didn’t glance up at the Chief; if he did, he’d notice the look on the older man’s face.

“Are you hurt?”

He shrugged, still refusing to look the Chief in the eye, “It’s not the first time I’ve been shoved into a wall by the old man.”

Hopper pushed the stop button on the recorder, “You’re not helping Max, and you sure as hell aren’t helping yourself by playing dumb, which I know for a fact you are anything but. I cannot help you, *or her* , if you don’t comply with the interview questions.”

He snapped his eyes to Jim’s at the mention of her, and stared him down.

“I’ve *never* given a shit about what happens to me, but the fact that *Max* had to experience what I’ve dealt with practically my whole life, *I don’t want her going back to the house, ever .*”

“Then help me, help you, by helping her. The more you incriminate

your father and her mother, the less likely it'll be that you'll be returned to their custody. You're both wards of the state at the moment. Jacob and I took care of that at the open of business today. If not for yourself kid, do it so she doesn't ever have to experience that again."

Billy nodded.

He watched as Hopper nodded in return and then reached out to press record again.

"Are you hurt?"

"Back's a little sore."

"Are you feeling tenderness? Do you believe there to be marks?"

"I don't know."

"Can we take a look?"

"Yes."

Jim stopped the recording and motioned for Billy to stand up.

"Billy, I, if there's bruises I'll have to make sure photos are taken. You said he shoved you into a wall? Was it a flat surface, or a corner?"

Billy just turned around the took his shirt off.

"Shit, kid, you've got yellow spots. Nothing looks new, but if last night was just from you being late to dinner what warranted these other marks?"

Billy looked him right in the eye, "I like boys. He thinks he can beat it out of me. Usually when I say that the interview tends to end with a, *well, son, we've heard all that we need* . Which tells me that despite being in California, despite being a minor with questionable bruising in a hospital, I fucking deserved it because I'm a goddamn *faggot* ."

His chest was heaving. He hadn't meant to get loud. Or so emotionally charged with that question.

Hopper just raised his hands, and nodded, “Okay. Look, I’m, I don’t give two shits who you fool around with. Nobody deserves to get the shit kicked out of them by their old man because the old bastard can’t take his head out of his own ass. You good to carry on?”

Billy just stared at him. Watched as the older man lounged back in his chair, waving his arms to indicate it was all up to Billy. He nodded and sat back down in his own chair, taking a few deep breaths to calm himself down.

“When we’re done here, I’ll have Flo take some photos of the marks on your body, that okay?”

Billy just nodded.

Hopper’s finger hovered over the record button and Billy nodded to begin again.

“Who shoved you into the wall?”

Billy bit his bottom lip, he’d never outright said his father before; “My dad, Neil, Neil Hargrove.”

“Has this person ever hit or hurt you before?”

Billy felt his eyes sting, “Yes.”

“Has anything, property wise, been broken or destroyed by this person?”

Bill took a deep breath and nodded, “Yes.”

“Has anything been thrown directly at you, or near you?”

He felt a tear slip down his cheek, “Yes.”

“You’re doing great Billy, just a few more questions okay? Do you need a minute, we can take a break?”

He shook his head, “Keep going, I don’t think I could do it again if we stopped.”

“Okay.”

“Can you tell me what happened?”

Billy took a deep breath, “I’d just gotten home from being out with a, a friend, and I, I knew I was going to be late, but I, I’d gotten a gift for Susan, my uh, step-mother. I, it was a picture of Max. She was smiling and singing in it, she uh, she hadn’t looked that since before we left California.

“I, I knew Neil would be angry at me being late to family dinner, but I’d, I’d thought that having a nice gift for Susan would help ease the tension a little. It, it did, she gushed over it like mom’s tend to over their daughters looking pretty in pictures.

“She uh, she asked Neil what he thought about it, and he focused on the boy in the photo. Asked who it was and Max told him the truth. That it was the boy who usually babysat their little gang of nerds. He uh, Neil, didn’t like that apparently a boy liked babysitting.

“I, I have no idea what possessed Max to get smart with him, but he apparently said something she didn’t like because she gave his attitude right back at him. Of course he called it being disrespectful. I uh, he asked if I knew the boy in the photo. I lied. I said no, and then Max, she uh, she told him that we play on the same basketball team at school.

“He, he said the usual verbal signal that was to let Susan know to distract Max, but for some reason, Max wasn’t having any of Neil’s shi--uh, stuff. She flat out asked him, ‘ *You going to beat the shit out of him again? Or are we not supposed to know about that?*’ And uh, that set the whole evening into motion.

“He uh, he raised his hand to hit her and I just, I dived over the table, knocking everything to the floor just to get between them. She called him out on trying to hit her. Called you, uh, the, the Police Chief, at uh, home. Told him what happened and then hung up and said the Chief was on his way.

“I, I hadn’t even heard Susan move, not, not until I heard her hand collide with Max’s cheek. She, she slapped her own daughter in the

face! I mean, she, she just, she always just *stood there* if Neil ever *disciplined* me in front of her. She'd turn her head away, press herself against whatever flat surface she could, and close her eyes, like, like if she wasn't seeing what was happening she didn't have to have an opinion about it. You, uh, the Chief of Police showed up not too long after that."

Billy looked up at Hopper, and immediately wished he hadn't. He'd seen enough pity in the eyes of other folks to last him a lifetime, but he'd seen far and few between, the look of someone who understood exactly what he was going through.

Jim pressed stop, "I think between the two of you, and your bruises, we'll have enough to ensure that Max never sets foot in that house again, not while they're there."

"I age out too soon don't I? To make any difference in what happens to me, sorry about your luck kid, good luck in this cold, cruel world."

"I didn't say that, and I'll my damndest to make sure that you get yours. I called out west earlier this morning. Got a hold of a few deputies that came by your old house a few times. Said the neighbors said there was always a man being called about, lots of yelling, screaming, and then they'd see you stumble out and either walk off into the night, or skateboard, or I guess once you got a car, drive off.

"Jesus, kid, I think I yelled at them and told them to be ashamed of themselves. A kid was being abused and everyone knew it but nobody did anything. They told me the same thing you did, about you saying enough to be heard, and that there wasn't anything they could do. I may have called an operator to find me the mothers of those deputies and told them their sons allowed the abuse of a boy all because they had a problem with the fact that he was gay."

Jim smiled a little, "Those mommas were very apologetic on your behalf, and sounded livid enough to verbally tear their grown sons a new one. If baked goods show up in the mail here, I'll be sure to pass some on to you."

Billy couldn't help but smile. He could use some humor.

“Thank you, Chief.”

Jim stood and walked around the table and put his hand on Billy’s shoulder, “You know you’re not him, right? You were trying to get by in a shitty situation.”

Billy nodded. He didn’t know what to say.

He was tired of everyone telling him he wasn’t his father. He’d threatened Max, hadn’t he? He’d grabbed her, rather roughly, a few times, hadn’t he? Yelled in her face even. Degraded her and her friends.

The door opened and in came Max and Mrs. Sinclair.

“You ready baby, or you need a minute?”

Max had came to his side and put her arms around his waist in a tight hug. He put his arms around her.

“Uh, I think, Flo needs to take some photos.”

He hated the small gasp Max made. He hated the brief flash of despair in Mrs. Sinclair’s eyes more.

“I’ll go get her, you want some privacy?”

He shrugged, “What’s it matter, depending on how this goes, they’ll be on display for everyone to see eventually.”

Mrs. Sinclair crossed the room and pulled the both of them into her arms, “Billy, sweetheart, you have every say in how your body is displayed, especially as evidence. If you need us to step out, we’ll give you the privacy and dignity you deserve.”

This lady was going to be the death of him! He had no idea how to handle her kindness. At all.

“It, it’s fine. They’re old.”

He shrugged the two ladies off and took his shirt off. Now, now he hated the small gasp Mrs. Sinclair made and the look in Max’s eyes.

He hated their sorries even more.

X-X-X-X-X-X

Billy and Max's eyes widened at the total on the register, and how nonchalantly Mrs. Sinclair just handed over her credit card. They'd only gotten three sets of jeans, and a handful of shirts for the both of them. But Mrs. Sinclair had insisted on a new pair of shoes for each of them, and actual winter coats--"It gets cold here fast," she'd said as justification.

"I'm going to stop at the payphones by the exit, call Jacob and let him know we're on our way. If everyone's there like Dustin said this morning, you guys okay with pizza for dinner? Because that's what we're having if The Party's over."

"And Steve! Dustin said he was going to bring them all over after school."

Billy didn't mean to trip over air, but sometimes, sometimes boys with stupid crushes did stupid things.

"You alright?"

"Oh he's just peachy, Ms. Kara. He gets to see Stevie when we get back to your house."

Billy hated the warmth he could feel spreading from his ears and cheeks, down to his belly.

"Oh, we have a crush on Steve Harrington?"

"We're just friends. Brand new friends I might add."

He hated that he knew, just knew, his face was still flushed.

"He's a handsome young man, he'd be lucky to have you."

Billy knew he had to have misheard Mrs. Sinclair. There was no way that she'd just said Steve would be lucky to have Billy. No way.

"He gets the biggest moony eyes when he's around! Keep an eye out

for them!”

Max was smiling and laughing a little, and as much as he wanted to knock the bags out of her hands, he knew that she needed this kind of banter just as much as he did.

They both stood off to the side as Kara called home. She was all smiles and laughing with whoever she was talking to. Her smile hadn't faded when she approached them after hanging up.

“Dustin sends his best wishes for a speedy, but safe, return to the house.”

Billy thought about today, and having to answer those questions, into a recorder no less, and then about how Flo had tsked as she took twenty-six photos of his torso and backside.

He followed behind Max and Ms. Kara down the rows of cars parked outside of the department store forty-five minutes outside of Hawkins. They had about an hour's ride back to the Sinclair household.

Maybe he could see if Steve would give him a hug.

Wishful thinking.

The car ride to the house was full of stilted laughter coming at his expense. He regrets admitting to Max that he has a crush on Steve. Ms. Kara had sent Max up ahead with her keys and some bags while she loitered with Billy.

“Rules still apply in my house, no closed doors if you invite Steve over.”

She grinned at his reddening face and turned and bolted up to the front door.

He could live in the woods, right? Make shelter or something.

Wishful thinking indeed.

20. Go Fish

Notes for the Chapter:

i begin college courses again this week...so i have no idea how often i will be able to update this fic...i'm going to have to find a balance between everything going on.

the thing that happens in this chapter, will get a redo later on...

happiness is coming, i promise! it's always darkest before the dawn....at least that's what i've heard...

again, there are no words to adequately express my adoration for the lot of you commenting and leaving kudos! i know this has taken some turns that weren't originally expected, but thanks for tagging along for the ride anyway!

everyone else going back to school, i wish you the best of luck this year!

everyone not going to school, returning to the grind of adulting, you got this!

i hope you guys have a great week! i might make sundays my update day...i'll keep y'all posted!

ps: the pizza toppings, my hubby swears it's delicious...i just, i can't get with fruit on a pizza.

Steve had never really been one to watch the clock, but he found himself frustrated by time moving so goddamn slow. It was like an hour had passed except when he'd look at the clock, it's only been five minutes.

Mrs. Johnson was a lifesaver. He really doesn't know how to thank her for yesterday. Letting him hide out in her room and doing mindless tasks.

He was actually participating in gym class today because he could see the giant clock on the wall.

He noticed Nancy was standing by the doors of the gym and she was waving at him. Could she not take the hint, he was done. But he found himself going to her anyway.

"Mike told me about Max and Billy. You're taking them all to Lucas' after school? And bringing them home afterwards?"

He nodded.

"I, is, is *he* okay?"

Steve shrugged, because he didn't know.

"Look, I, I know that I was in the wrong, and I am so sorry."

Steve cut her off, "You're not sorry you're *guilty*. There's a huge difference between those two things."

"Doesn't mean that I can't be sorry."

"It does when you and I both know that you're only apologizing because you feel guilty about what you did. You feel sorry for causing a rift you had no business in in the first place. I'm his friend and that's none of your business. End of discussion."

He turned around and walked away from her. Ignoring the looks between his classmates and their unasked questions.

He hated that rumors about *him* had already started going around.

Did you hear about Billy Hargrove? He ran away, back to California. He kidnapped his sister and they're running away. I'd heard that he killed his father and is in jail. His father? I'd heard he killed himself.

He wanted to tell them all to shut up. Tell them that *his* life was not

their business.

But he knows that word travels fast in a small town. Especially when you're someone like Billy Hargrove. Something shiny that blew in from the west.

He looked at the clock, he was done. He'll take a detention slip for cutting out early. He just wanted to see Billy, and Max.

He quickly changed his clothes and booked it to his car. Drove down to the middle school and sat out front. He had forty minutes to kill. He noticed movement by the school doors and saw the four boys. He glanced down at the clock on his dash, they were early too.

The drive to the Sinclair household was full of tension that not even Dustin was verbalizing. Steve thinks that seeing each other, meeting up like they were, really put into perspective what one of their own was dealing with. Or had been dealing with on some level.

Steve doesn't really know how much Max knew of Billy and his dad, if anything. He knows that she's said a few things that are now questionable behaviors.

Was it his fault for keeping Billy out, that this happened? Or would it have happened anyway? Did Billy, or would Billy, even want to see Steve right now?

He parked on the curb and followed the kids up to the house.

Mr. Sinclair had opened the door, "They're on their way back. Kara called a little bit ago to let me know they were heading home. We'll keep it between us that you fellas showed up a little early. We're ordering pizza, so speak now or forever hold your peace about toppings."

Steve smiled as the boys all started shouting out toppings at once. Jacob gave Steve an exasperated smile and nodded to the all the toppings being called out.

"William Byers, that's blasphemy in this house, asking for pineapple!"

"It's for Max! I swear! She says it's a thing people do in California.

They sound like weirdos to me,” Will blurted out.

“I’ll try it!” Dustin shouted.

“Dustin, that’s disgusting!” Lucas and Mike said together.

“Fine, we’ll get one, very small, pizza with pineapples and ham on it.” Mr. Sinclair added.

“Uh, it’s actually pineapple, jalapenos, and grilled chicken,” said Will.

“Oh my god, that’s so much worse!” Shouted Mike.

Steve couldn’t help but laugh. He also wondered what they’d think if they realized the pizza they were discussing wasn’t actually Max’s, it was Billy’s.

They all played games of cards, mostly go fish, because Erica showed up not too long after they did and she wanted to be included. Mike had to bribe her with candy not to tell her mother that they’d left school early. Girl could sniff out a secret like nobody Steve had ever met.

They all took a collective deep breath when the headlights of Mrs. Sinclair’s car flashed in the windows. They were back.

Mrs. Johnson had told Steve that the reason Billy was out of school was due to the questioning he and Max would have to sit through. She’d told him that she’d grade their assignment off of what they’ve done, removing the last few weeks so it wouldn’t count against them. Extenuating Circumstances, or some such reason she can use as a teacher.

They heard three doors shut and they tried, they really, badly, so horribly, tried, to be into their current game of go fish.

“Mike do you have a seven?” Dustin asked.

“No.”

A beat, “Uh, Mike, you’re supposed to tell me ‘go fish.’”

Mike rolled his eyes, “Go fish.”

“Thank you, oh hey guys! We’re just playing cards while we wait for pizza to get here. Need help with anything?”

Steve would forever love and hate Dustin’s ability to just blurt shit out.

Mrs. Sinclair glanced around the room, looking at all of them, and then looked right at Erica, “They all left school early didn’t they?”

Steve watched as Erica, the traitorous little brat, just took a large bite of the candy Mike had bribed her earlier with, and nodded. He couldn’t help but laugh.

Mr. Sinclair got to his feet to greet his wife with a kiss and to take her bags from her, “Food should be here in a few. It was a toss up really on who would get here first, you guys or the food. Hey Max, you want to join the guys in a rousing game of go fish?”

Steve noticed that Billy hadn’t followed Mrs. Sinclair and Max up the steps into their living room.

Should he excuse himself and go find him? Or just wait to see if he resurfaces? He had no idea what to do in this kind of situation. He wasn’t sure if it was proper to ask either. Mrs. Sinclair stepped up to where Steve was seated at the table and put her hand on his shoulder, “Good to see you Steve. I thought I told you boys *tomorrow* for stopping by?”

While Dustin and Lucas started talking over the other she bent low to his ear, “Go on down and check on Billy. Jim said he had a hard time today.”

She seamlessly put herself in Steve’s seat, keeping the kids distracted while giving them lip about not following her rule of forty-eight hours of no visitors.

He made quick work of darting down the stairs to the den. He took the last few very slowly, unsure if he was welcome or not.

He noticed Billy immediately, sitting with his back to the stairs, head

in his hands. Steve wanted to cross the room and take the other boy in his arms, just to give him some comfort, or just anything really.

“Shitbird, I thought I told you I was fine.”

Steve hated how rough Billy’s voice sounded.

“Uh, not, uh, not shitbird.”

Billy’s shoulders tensed and Steve immediately regretting saying anything.

“I, I can go, if, if you’d rather be alone. I just, I, I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Steve?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

Billy finally turned around to face him and Steve could live without ever seeing that look on the other boy’s face for the rest of his life--their lives. Billy looked so broken, so hurt, and Steve had no idea what to do.

“Did Max send you?”

“No, uh, Ms. Kara did.”

He was going to ignore the pink that immediately flooded Billy’s face.

“Mr. Jacob ordered your favorite pizza. It’s a small, and for future reference, it is considered blasphemy in the Sinclair household to order fruit on a pizza.”

Steve knew his attempt at humor fell flat but he wanted, no needed, to try anyway.

“You should do that more often.”

Steve looked at Billy, “Do what?”

“Smile like that.”

“You like my smile?”

Billy ran his hands through his hair, “Look, it’s been a day and I just, can I ask you for a favor?”

Steve nodded. He didn’t even know what Billy was going to ask him, but if he could help him out in any way, he was going to do his best.

“I’m not, I usually don’t really do this, but um, can, can I have a hug?”

Steve hoped and prayed that his face was not showing how elated he was on the inside. His heart was racing and sounded like it had turned into a bass drum.

“Yeah man, sure.”

He took the last two steps down and crossed the room over to where Billy was sitting on the fold-out bed. He noticed the two sets of pillows and blankets.

“You and Max had a slumber party?”

Billy stood up and rolled his eyes, “It was a rough night all around, neither of us wanted to be alone.”

Steve didn’t hesitate, not being this up close to Billy, and having permission to pull the other boy close. He tugged him in by the lapels of that stupid denim jacket he always insisted on wearing, and then put his arms around this middle, curving his arms up Billy’s back--forcing the other boy to hug him back up around his own shoulders.

“And the answer is yes.”

Steve didn’t say anything, he had no idea what Billy was talking about.

“Your smile, I like it.”

Billy’s arms tightened around him, pressing their torsos closer together, being near flush chest to navel. He let out a groan turned sigh and pulled back from Steve and looked him in the eye.

“Pretty Boy, we’re friends, right?”

Steve nodded, “Yes, why?”

“Can I kiss you?”

“What?”

Billy looked alarmed, as if he hadn’t meant to say those words. Words that Steve had been wanting the other boy to say. He took another few steps back away from Steve.

“I, I am so sorry! I know you’re not, I ju--”

Steve stepped up into Billy’s space and put his hands on the other boy’s waist, “ Yes .”

Billy pressed forward, lips nearly brushing against Steve’s as he spoke, “You better not be fucking with me?”

Steve didn’t respond, he closed the little distance between them and pressed his lips against Billy’s.

He hated every single cliché that ever existed to explain a first kiss. Mostly because he hated how right they are about what you feel.

He felt elated. He felt like the world had finally righted itself on its axis. He felt like everything finally made sense--perfectly clear.

Billy’s hands came up between them, gently cupping Steve’s face, his palms cupping smooth cheeks, body pressing closer to Steve.

Those stupid fireworks people talk about, he was feeling them.

Their breaths harsh and hot through their nostrils pulsed down their cheeks as they refused to pull apart. Lips pressing and parting as they stood there, taking and giving everything to each other.

Steve had never felt like this kissing anyone before.

Billy pulled away first and looked into Steve’s eyes, “You better not be fucking with me.”

“I’m not! Promise! I, even before uh, last night happened, I uh, I

thought about finding you at home to tell you to come out and talk to me.”

Billy looked at him, “I won’t be your experiment.”

Steve shook his head, “No, oh, no, no, no! I, I told you I’ve never cared about the packaging. I, I like *you* .”

“Even as fucked up as I am? This, this shit storm is just beginning,” Billy tugged at some strands of hair, “I shouldn’t have asked to kiss you. You’re so good Steve Harrington. Such a good person that you shouldn’t be brought down to my level of bullshit.”

Steve didn’t realize he’d moved until he held Billy’s face in his hands, making sure the other boy was looking into his eyes, “ I kissed you you idiot. I’m not going anywhere. You are not alone in dealing with this. You have everyone that’s upstairs in this house, and you, you have me. You’re not alone Billy.”

“They could send Max back west, to her dad. I don’t, I, I age out in a few months when I turn eighteen. I’d be, I’d be put out of the system.”

“Hop won’t let you two out of the city limits. He’d send your old man packing before he let someone take you guys from here.”

Billy looked skeptical, “In my experience, Harrington, nobody gives a shit about *two* kids from shitty homes. I had friends up and disappear overnight. Never to be seen or spoken to again because of situations like these.”

“You’re not in California anymore. Hop’s lived with a man like Neil, he’s not going to just toss this to the side of his desk. If he didn’t care, you and Max would still be at ho--that house.”

Billy looked at Steve, and Steve knew the words that were going to come out of the other boy’s mouth, “I, I still shouldn’t have asked to kiss you. I, I’m not good for anybody right now. Not, not with having to deal with all of this. I wish she hadn’t said anything. I could’ve just waited till I turned eighteen and then I could’ve just left town and never looked back. They’d have their stupid little perfect family and

I'd be out of their lives."

Steve watched the other boy step back and turn away from him; "Billy, I, I can be your friend. We don't, we don't have to pursue anything."

Billy let out a broken laugh, "I already told you that I can't just be your friend, Pretty Boy."

The doorbell ringing halted any more words between the two of them. They listened as footsteps came down to the foyer and as the door opened. Jacob greeted the driver and paid him and took the food, closing the door.

"Come on up boys, food's here! You'll want some before these heathens get their hands on it!"

The two boys just stared at each other. Steve so badly wanted to say something to Billy. Just because he couldn't be his friend didn't mean he doesn't need a friend right now.

Billy took a deep breath and squared his shoulders and headed up the steps, not even bothering to see if Steve was following.

He heard the kids greet Billy, and then heard Dustin's outrage at the small pizza being his; "But Will, you, you said it was Max's pizza!"

He slowly made his way upstairs. Despite his lips still feeling all tingly and wanting to kiss Billy again, he had a feeling that whatever it was they had been working towards, they'd just fucked up. Big time.

21. Between A Glance And A Kiss

Notes for the Chapter:

alternate POVs

next chapter picks up immediately after

this is what just came out when i started writing....uh, most chapters are free written as they come to me....

things will turn around, promise!

Steve stared at the envelope in Dustin's hand. An envelope that held very familiar handwriting of his own name on the front.

"Uh, it wasn't sealed, and I should warn you, you're kind of an idiot buddy."

That snapped Steve out of his head and he yanked the envelope out of Dustin's outstretched hand.

"Billy, while we have the sordid history that we do with him, has proven a worthy atonement at protecting Max."

"Dustin, shut up! We don't know what happened!"

"Uh, well, you see, Hop took the files home the other night and El may have read them while he was sleeping, and she told Mike who told Will who told me and then I told Lucas, and now I'm telling you."

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose, "Buddy, that's, this is such an invasion of privacy for Billy and Max. You guys haven't said anything to her have you?"

"Not, no, uh, yet?"

“ *Promise* me you guys won’t say anything until she opens up to you first! I mean it Dustin, I know you guys mean well, but this, this isn’t something like the Upside Down where we all have an understanding. This, you guys know that her father is still alive and in California right? If he finds out all he has to do is file paperwork and she’s *gone* .”

He hadn’t meant to burst out like that, especially to Dustin, but the kid’s face going pale for a moment let him know that he finally understood how serious Max and Billy temporarily being house by the Sinclair’s is.

“She, she didn’t say anything to us last night. She, she just said she was glad that we were there for her and that, that she’s glad to be doing this with Billy. She wouldn’t want anyone else in her corner.”

Steve nodded towards his car, “Get in.”

They both climbed in and buckled up. The entire ride to the middle school was in silence. The letter from Billy still clutched in Steve’s hand.

When he pulled up to let Dustin out, “Steve, he’s not telling you goodbye if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Steve felt himself flush, “Get out asshole! I’ll see you after AV.”

Dustin just pat his arm like he was placating the older boy and got out and shut the door. He waved before turning towards the school and walking off.

He drove up to the high school and parked and turned off the ignition. He stared at his name written in Billy’s handwriting. He could see the smear of butter from Dustin being nosy; the kid was good though. Steve was so intrigued to know just what was in the envelope if it wasn’t Billy telling him goodbye.

He glanced around the parking lot, not sure what or who he was looking for. He saw Jonathan and Nancy leaning against her family’s car talking with some of her friends. He saw Tommy and Carol, arms around each other, glancing around the lot while talking with their

group of friends.

He took the piece of paper out and began to read.

PRETTY BOY,

I COULDN'T SLEEP. MAX WENT UP TO ERICA'S ROOM SO I'VE BEEN LEFT TO MY OWN DEVICES.

I'M SORRY.

FOR EARLIER. FOR LAST NIGHT.

YOU WERE ONLY TRYING TO HELP AND I KEPT PUSHING YOU AWAY. I'M SORRY THAT'S MY DEFAULT SETTING. KEEP PEOPLE AT ARM'S LENGTH SO I DON'T GET HURT.

IT GETS LONELY THOUGH.

I GET THE ASSIGNMENT NOW. FROM MRS. JOHNSON. IT TOOK YOU TELLING ME THAT I WASN'T ALONE IN ORDER TO GET IT.

FUCK ME, YOU HAVE ME FEELING LIKE A STUPID LITTLE SCHOOL GIRL WITH A CRUSH AFTER EARLIER. I MEAN, MORE SO THAN I ALREADY WAS ACTING LIKE A STUPID SCHOOL GIRL WITH A CRUSH.

I CAN'T BE YOUR FRIEND BUT I KNOW I NEED ONE. ESPECIALLY NOW.

BUT YOU KISSED ME FIRST. I ASKED, BUT YOU MADE THE MOVE. AND I HAVE NEVER FELT SO ALIVE THAN I DID THE MOMENT OUR LIPS TOUCHED.

Steve felt his entire body flush with embarrassment--Dustin had read this! Had any of the other kids?

I WISH I HAD THE WORDS, MY OWN WORDS, TO DESCRIBE HOW I FELT IN THAT MOMENT, BUT I DON'T. I COULDN'T EVEN FATHOM A THOUGHT OF MORE THAN "OH," WHEN YOU PRESSED YOUR LIPS TO MINE. BUT I'VE FOUND THEM:

*THERE'S A MOMENT
BETWEEN A GLANCE AND A KISS
WHERE THE WORLD STOPS,
FOR THE BRIEFEST OF TIMES
AND THE ONLY THING BETWEEN US
IS THE ANTICIPATION
OF YOUR LIPS ON MINE.*

*A MOMENT
SO INTENSE
IT HANGS IN THE AIR
AS IT PULLS US CLOSER
A MOMENT,
SO PERFECT,
THAT WHEN IT COMES TO AN END,
WE REALIZE;*

IT'S ONLY JUST BEGINNING

*I DON'T KNOW WHO SAID THEM, BUT I KNOW THAT'S HOW I
FELT LAST NIGHT.*

*I KNOW I SAID SOMETHING STUPID THE MOMENT WE PARTED.
AND I KNOW I WAS HORRIBLE TO IGNORE YOU THE REST OF
THE EVENING.*

I'M SORRY!

*I'M A WRECK STEVE. I'VE BEEN DEALING WITH MY DAD'S
BULLSHIT FOR MOST OF MY LIFE AND TO FINALLY BE FREE OF*

IT, EVEN IF IT'S ONLY TEMPORARY, I'M TERRIFIED. I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO. I'VE NEVER HAD THE FREEDOM TO MAKE MY OWN CHOICES BECAUSE BEFORE, BEFORE IT WAS ALWAYS DONE WITH THE LOOMING CONSEQUENCE OF WHAT IF HE FINDS OUT I DID THIS, OR THAT?

HOW FORTUNATE FOR HIM THAT WE MOVED SOMEWHERE THAT REQUIRES LAYERS OF CLOTHING BECAUSE IT MEANT BRUISES COULD SPREAD OUT.

PLEASE COME BY AGAIN TODAY. STAY , WHEN YOU DROP THE KIDS BACK OFF. PLEASE?

YOU'VE MADE THIS PLACE MORE BEARABLE, AND I'M SELFISH ENOUGH TO ASK YOU TO GIVE ME WHATEVER YOU'RE WILLING TO GIVE. EVEN IF IT MEANS YOU'RE ONLY MY FRIEND.

MAX IS AT THE LIBRARY IN TOWN FOR THE DAY. SHE WANTS TO KEEP UP ON HER CLASSES AND JUST GET OUT AND ABOUT. PLUS WE'D KILL EACH OTHER BEING LOCKED UP IN SOMEONE ELSE'S HOUSE ALL DAY WITH NOBODY ELSE FOR COMPANY. MRS. SINCLAIR WENT TO WORK TODAY SO IT'S JUST ME.

I HOPE TO SEE YOU LATER.

xB

Steve glanced around the parking lot once again, noticing that majority of everyone had gone inside. He glanced at the clock and then down at the words in his hands; he tossed the letter onto the passenger seat and started his car and drove off.

X-X-X-X-X-X

He peered through the peephole in the door to see who was knocking. He immediately sucked in a breath and turned around, pressing his back against the door.

What was *he* doing here? He should be at school!

He took a breath and realized his letter, he must've gotten his letter.

"Uh, I, I know you're there Billy. Can you, can you open the door, please?"

Billy groaned, "I, I don't know if that's a good idea Stevie."

"You're the one who asked me to come by again."

Billy shook his nerves out, ran his hands through his hair and took a deep breath before he opened the door to reveal Steve.

"Fancy meeting you here, Princess."

Steve pushed in the house, " *Even if it means you're only my friend. Are you stupid Billy Hargrove?*"

He closed the door and turned to face Steve, who had stopped within the threshold.

"I see you got my letter."

Steve let out an exasperated sigh, " *I see you got my letter. Got. Your. Fucking. Letter. Are you serious right now? Like, for real Billy, I don't know what you want from me! You tell me that we can't be friends, we kiss, and then you all but tell me that we can be friends, if that's what I want because you're a selfish asshole!*"

"How was I supposed to know you had a crush on me if you NEVER said anything about it? How was I supposed to know that I was inadvertently leading you on? I, I would love nothing more than to kiss you again because I haven't been able to think of anything else, but you're right. *We can't* .

"We can't move forward in any direction, if we don't talk about things. But that's not something you do so we're just going to be stuck at this stupid impasse for who knows how long."

Billy watched as Steve moved to sit on the steps. He wanted to say something but what could he say? Steve was right. He didn't want to talk about things. He hated talking about things.

"I told Dustin about Max's dad. That if things get back to him he can take Max. All he'd have to do is fill out paperwork. She'd be gone and there's nothing nobody could do about it."

Billy knew Steve was only saying that to get a reaction out of him. Boy always knew just what buttons to push of Billy's to get him to say something.

"She doesn't want to go anywhere. Least of all back to her dad, then back to that house. She's shit out of luck though because I heard Jacob talking to Kara last night after they'd sent us to bed. Jacob only knows one actual foster home in this town, but the woman hasn't done anything related in over a decade.

"He says it might be hard to convince someone to let her start operating again. But with these current circumstances, the judge he's been talking to might make an exception. Chief's been pressing Max's biological father's alcoholism, drug abuse, and history of temporary homelessness as a means to keep him from having rights to her during this time.

"Shit, Steve, had I known *all it took* was someone who fucking gave a shit about kids, I could've used those reasons as a means to get away from Neil years ago. I don't want her to leave here. I've never seen her so happy."

"Do you know who it is? Who uh, who'd be taking you guys in?"

Billy tugged at his shirt, "Uh, I think I heard the name Henderson."

Steve looked confused, "Dustin's mom?"

"Kara said she'd give her a call later today, if she didn't run into her."

"Why can't you guys stay here?"

Billy motioned for Steve to get up and follow him downstairs; "Because Princess, this is the real world and just because we're being safe housed right now, this isn't an ideal long-term situation. The Sinclair's are not a foster home for long-term care. If Henderson refuses or can't open her doors, we're being sent up to Indianapolis. And if that's the case, then that's it for me. I age out in a few months,

you'd probably never see me again."

Steve sat down on the edge of the bed, "You, you don't mean that. You won't just abandon Max like that."

Billy paced around the den, resolutely trying to not look at Steve. They should've went upstairs to the living room where he could keep distance between them.

"I'd send her money every time I got paid. So if she wanted to stay when she finally ages out, she'd have something saved up so she could stay if she wanted. She wants to go to college though, so whatever I'd send her way would help her out."

"Will you just look at me, please?"

He didn't even know he was stopping to turn and face Steve until he was looking directly into those deep, brown eyes.

"Billy, come here, please? Have a seat."

Again, he felt his body responding to Steve's request against his will. Or maybe it was subconsciously he'd do anything Steve asked of him. He sat down beside the other boy on the edge of the bed and turned to face him.

"You're right, I don't know about how these things work, but I do know Dustin's mom. She'd gladly take you and Max in. She could use a man around the house. You'd be very useful because I know you enough to know that you'd offer to help her out with anything she needed.

"Don't make that face, you know I'm right. Now, you didn't get much sleep, I'm exhausted, so we're going to take a nap. I still have to get the kids later, and I bet Max didn't pack a lunch to take with her. Plus, I'm sure you'll want your car. I can sneak in and get your keys for you."

Steve shifted himself so he was stretched out on the other side of the bed, leaving the side Billy was sitting on to him.

"Billy, we'll take everything a day at a time. No use in focusing on

that what ifs when we don't know what's going to happen. Now, lay down before I make you lay down and sleep."

Billy sighed but stiffly laid down beside Steve. He made sure that nothing was near the other boy. Even though he wanted nothing more than to reach out and just touch him. Feel his hand in his, or let their legs brush against each other. Just something to share a moment with the other boy.

"For the record, I can't stop thinking about last night either. Even with all this other bullshit, it's like the one good thing I have to hold on to."

He felt Steve's hand lay on top of his own, "I'm not going anywhere. I'll be here for as long as you need me to be. In whatever capacity you need me."

Billy let out a small huff of laughter, "I said the same thing to Max this morning."

Steve smiled.

"You should know that Dustin read your letter."

"Max warned me when I asked her to pass it along to one of them."

He felt Steve remove his hand and shift beside him. He glanced out of the corner of his eye, couldn't risk looking straight on. Steve had rolled onto his side, facing Billy.

"I, I could wait you know. For you. For all of this to, to get worked through. I, I'd wait for you. Whenever you're ready."

"*Steve*," Billy said breathlessly, "I, I can't do that to you. I can't ask you to wait for me. I don't, I don't know how long this is going to take, let alone what's about to happen."

Steve's hand cupped Billy's face, "Then why are you fighting me on this? You *want* this, it's why you said we couldn't be just friends in the first place!"

Billy sat up and got to his feet, "You should go. This, you're not, you

don't know how to make things easy do you?"

Steve hadn't moved, merely laid there, staring up at Billy.

"Did you not hear me, Harrington? You should go."

Steve slowly sat up and even slower, got to his feet. He walked around the bed and stood in front of Billy.

"Tell me, in my face, look me in the eye, and tell me you want me gone. Tell me you don't feel anything and I'll go. No questions asked. No harm done."

Billy looked down and away, "That's not fair."

"Fair? You want me to be fair? You're pushing me away when I've done nothing but offer you support. I don't even know what happened to you two and here I am!"

Billy glanced at him, "Do you want to know what happened? The other night? It's not pretty. In fact there's photographic evidence of my own goddamned body at the police station because of what's been going on in that godforsaken house."

Billy felt his chest tighten and his heart race.

"My whole fucking life is in the balance and you're worried about, about a stupid fucking kiss? Jesus Christ, Harrington, no wonder people used to think you're an asshole. If this is you being my friend, I'll pass."

Billy turned and stormed to the stairs, he stopped at the landing by the front door and called down to Steve, "You can get out now."

22. She Was On A Mission

Notes for the Chapter:

so uh, here...

...i hope you like the second half of this chapter...

the italics quotes steve throws at billy are from The Outsiders.

Steve followed him up the stairs and stared the other boy down, "For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

He hated knowing that he could've used different words, *better* words, to throw at Billy. He watched the other boy breathing hard, as if he couldn't catch his breath.

"You know what, I, I'm actually sorry that our timing sucks, because I like you. Fucked up and angry as you are, I like you. I liked kissing you and I wouldn't mind doing it again."

"You're being a stubborn asshole about this. I'm offering you everything, *everything* and you're still shoving me off to the side because you don't want to deal with your feelings. Tough shit Billy Hargrove."

Billy let out a broken cackle.

"Are you for real right now, Harrington? You're going to come at me with your stupid little words about *feelings*, after I tell you my whole life is going to shit and I don't know what to do? And you still want to press me about how I feel for you?"

He stood up and stalked over to Steve, causing him to step back for each step forward until his back was pressed against the front door.

"You want to know what I *want* from you, what I would gladly *take* from you right now?"

Steve felt the hot breaths between each word flutter across his face as

Billy crowded against him.

He felt hands on his hips, moving his shirt and sweater up so they could touch skin.

He felt lips graze his jaw, heading towards his left ear.

“I would use you as the best kind of distraction. I’d take you on this floor, *right here, right now* if to get a moment’s solace from the shitstorm that is my life. You think you can come in here and save the day? You’re no knight in shining armor Princess. You don’t know how to rescue people.”

Thumbs were drawing small circles on his hip bones while a nose nuzzled in his hair.

“You’re terrified right now. You have *no idea* what I’m capable of doing to you and you’re not even sure if you want everything you’re trying to offer me. You ever had a dick in your mouth? You ever had fingers up your ass? You ever had a tongue lick you open? I bet the only other dicks you’ve ever laid your eyes on are the peeks you’ve braved in the showers at school.”

Steve swallowed.

“I’ve peeked at you plenty. I’d gladly get on my knees for you *Stevie* . I’d *swallow you down* and *choke* on you for days. I’d ride you, have you fill me up in the filthiest of ways, and do it all again, and *again* , and *again* , until you were coming without ejaculating. *I’d wring you dry* .”

Steve felt like he was burning from head to toe. Billy’s thumbs still making small circles on his hips as his fingers kneaded the skin they were touching.

The other boys hot breaths as he spoke into his ear were fueling the heat that has lit up his body.

“But you’re a virgin when it comes to going that far with boys, aren’t you? I’d ruin *every single person* who would come into your life after me. You’d only think of me when they’d go down on you, cock or ass.”

Steve knows that Billy is mouthing off just to get a rouse out of him.

“S-st-stop!”

Billy froze his movements and stared into Steve's eyes, “Did I offend your delicate nature?”

“I, I'm not, I'm not delicate!”

He felt Billy's smirk along his jaw, “Pretty Boy, you saying that you'd let me have my way with you? Be my emotional support? Give me *whatever I need* ?”

Steve turned his head away from where Billy had started nuzzling again.

“You, I, I'd let you use me, if, if that's what you need. But, b-bu-but I don't think you would treat me like that.”

He felt a small nip on his jaw, close to where it hinges, "Sure about that?"

“I'm, I don't, you're not going to though,” he rushed out.

Billy laughed against his neck, “Oh yeah? You think that I wouldn't take advantage of you? Milk you for all the sympathy I could get from you?”

“ You still have a lot of time to make yourself be what you want. There's still lots of good in the world.”

Billy immediately stepped back from Steve's space at those words.

Steve kept going, “ *Suddenly it wasn't only a personal thing to me. I could picture hundreds and hundreds of boys living on the wrong sides of cities, boys with black eyes who jumped at their own shadows. Hundreds of boys who maybe watched sunsets and looked at stars and ached for something better. I could see boys going under street lights because they were mean and tough and hated the world, and it was too late to tell them that there was still good in it, and they wouldn't believe you if you did. It was too much of a problem to be just a personal thing.*”

Steve looked him in the eye, "That's what you take from that story. You *know* their story because you *live* it. You think that you're so horrible and undeserving of anything good, you sabotage it yourself."

Billy shoved at Steve, and he let him.

He understood now.

He doesn't know why one of the first letters they exchanged was coming to mind, but he was grateful for it.

He'd even let him hit him, *again*, if it'd help.

"You think you know me now? Just from some letters and a little bit of time together?"

"I know enough about you to realize that you're terrified of what's going to happen. You don't like not being in control of your life. I don't think anybody does.

"I'm not going anywhere. I meant it when I told you that. You can be an asshole all you want, you can push me away as hard as you want to, but I am *not* going anywhere.

"Now, we're going down to your bed, you are going to sleep, and then we'll go get Max, and I will take you guys to lunch."

He watched as Billy deflated and nodded.

"You are not weak Billy."

He reached out to gently grab the other's wrist and started to tug, leading him down the stairs.

He manoeuvred the other boy onto the bed pulled up the blanket and tucked him in.

"You, uh, you're staying right?"

Steve didn't respond. He walked around the bed and climbed in.

He laid on his side, facing Billy.

In seconds he had his arms full of him. Billy grabbed onto him and after a few moments Steve realized he was crying.

He shifted their bodies enough for both of his arms to be free, to rub them along Billy's back.

He didn't say anything. One he wasn't sure what to say, and two, he knows that if he did open his mouth, Billy would never talk with him again.

So he held on. He offered whatever comfort he could.

His shirt was wet by the time he felt Billy's body relax, and heard a few sniffles while being asleep.

He wrapped his arms tighter around him and held on.

He'd meant it when he told Dustin this, what Billy and Max were dealing with, was *nothing* like the Upside Down. Steve had a fleeting thought, that Neil Hargrove was a monster, and he knew how to deal with monsters.

x-x-x-x-x

She was on a mission. Albeit an uphill battle, but she wanted *all* of the available facts in her favor.

She had spent all morning in the legal section of texts in the library. Mostly looking at the laws where child abuse and/or neglect are present.

So far, everything has been going in directions she doesn't want to acknowledge.

She's not stupid. No matter how many times she's heard it from Neil or Billy.

She *knows* that all her mom would have to do is call her dad, or send

him a message, notifying him of the current situation and he would make certain her mom lost all parental rights. She'd be trading off Neil's abuse for her dad's neglect.

She is determined to stay in Hawkins.

She *likes* it here.

She has *friends* here.

Besides, the Upside Down is still hanging in the shadows, she can't just abandon The Party.

She *should* be surprised to see that her brother arrived a little after one with Harrington in tow. But she's *not*.

She quickly stows her day's findings into her backpack and puts the two books she had been skimming through on a return cart.

"You look completely lost in here."

Billy smirked down at her, "We can't all be nerds; it's a cross I have to bear."

"Does Ms. Kara know you came to get me early?"

Steve spoke up, "No, but I can let her know. Did Kara leave you a number to call if you needed anything?"

Max nodded and dug in the front pocket of her backpack and pulled out the small scrap of paper that had Kara's work phone number.

"Great! I'll go see if I can use the library phone, you finish up and I'll meet you guys by the door in a few."

She watched Billy watch Steve as he walked away. She'd never understand how he thought he wasn't obvious about his crush on Steve.

"You should do that more often."

He turned and looked at her, brows raised, "What?"

She smiled, “Smile. I like that he brings it out in you.”

She reveled in the pink that blossomed on his cheeks. He didn’t have a retort so she counted it as a win.

“What were you working on so intently today? That required legal books?”

She glanced over his shoulder at Steve who had managed to get the phone at the desk rather than have to use one of the payphones in the lobby.

“Information that should be beneficial for the both of us.”

Billy looked at her, “It’s all bullshit isn’t it?”

She nodded, “They could send me to my dad. All he’d have to do is catch wind of this and he’d either make the money to come get me himself, or he’d make the proper phone calls and paperwork, and send me packing.”

“I age out in a few months, I couldn’t even get help if I wanted it.”

She glanced back over at Steve who was waiting by the front doors, “Come on loverboy, your boyfriend’s waiting for us.”

“Can it shitbird, he’s not my boyfriend.”

“But you want him to be!”

“We’re not in California.”

She bumped her shoulder into his arm, “Chicken shit. That’s not a no!”

“I know.”

She liked this banter between them. It was carefree and they’ve *never* had a moment like this before.

She’s not grateful per se that her mom slapped her in the face, or that Neil had threatened and then tried to hit her. But she is glad that she

and Billy have this understanding between them now. Even if it's a little tentative still.

She gets why he is the way he is. Does it mean she forgives him for all of his shitty choices? Not a chance, but she can't forget them now. Look at them from a different perspective.

She never wanted to understand him--to understand where he came from, why he did the things he did.

She watches as he steps away from her and crowds a little close to Steve. Causing their arms to brush against each other as they walk ahead of her out of the library and to Steve's car.

She knows that she's looking for it. Anybody else would just see two guys walking side-by-side. They wouldn't notice the way Billy keeps making his hand bump into Steve's. Or the way that Steve seems to just lean into Billy while they walk together.

She read his letter to Steve. She read it out loud to Dustin and Lucas before they rushed their separate ways for the day.

She's always known that Billy's a romantic at heart. Despite his tough exterior, he really is a good hearted person. He means well, if a little misguided in direction. Growing up with someone like Neil as your main caregiver, she wouldn't expect anything less than who Billy is.

She also liked the poem he used in his letter. She knew that's how she felt right before she kissed Lucas at the dance. There is something about that moment before you kiss someone, but she's not dwelling on her and Lucas right now.

She's focused on the boys in front of her, laughing at each other, as if they've forgotten that quickly she was behind them. Billy needs someone like Steve, she thinks.

"Shotgun!" She yells just because she can.

They both freeze the few paces in front of her and Steve's laughing, and Billy's glaring.

"To be fair Hargrove, she called it first."

She matched Billy's glare, knowing neither of them were being serious--but she was dead serious about riding shotgun. Dustin never let her if they were all catching a ride with Steve.

Billy grumbled and turned around and walked over to the car, purposefully making a show of having to get in the backseat.

She noticed the letter on the front seat, about the same time Steve did too. She smiled softly as he quickly grabbed it and folded it up.

"It was very sweet."

"Oh, you, uh, I thought it was only Dustin who invaded our privacy."

She laughed and glanced over her shoulder at Billy; he shrugged. He didn't seal it so it technically was fair game.

"I read it aloud to him *and Lucas* this morning. They think it's gross because it's a love letter."

Steve nodded, "Yeah, Dustin said I was being an idiot."

"You kind of were," Billy supplied from the backseat.

She let them start bickering back and forth and just observed and listened. She could see why Billy liked Steve, and she supposes, why Steve likes Billy in return.

She's met Nancy a few times. She's not the kind of girl Max would ever want to be friends with, but if she snagged a guy like Steve Harrington, she definitely sees Billy and him lasting a lot longer than Steve and Nancy did.

She knew the guys were curious about what happened that night. Lucas has been wonderful. He's been patient with her distance, at least as far as *they* are concerned as an item. As a friend he's been fantastic. She's slightly worried about telling El, because she knows that even if asked, her emotional state won't keep her thoughts from projecting of the other night. El would destroy Neil. She'd say something along the lines of him reminding her of Papa. He'd deserve it, but Max wouldn't want him to get the easy way out. He deserves to *suffer* for what he did to his own child.

She shook her head, playing it off as fixing her hair. She let the sound of the two idiot boys almost in love with each other drown out her thoughts. Their back and forth grounded her. As they pulled onto the road from the parking lot, she smiled to herself--they deserved to be happy.

23. I Think They Know

Notes for the Chapter:

i hope y'all like this one!

PS: if this hurricane is impacting you in any way, please stay safe! it hasn't made landfall yet and it's already wreaking havoc! and they're saying it might hit at a cat5 YIKES!

Billy glanced in the direction Steve had walked off in, something about putting coins in the jukebox and picking some music. He glanced over at Max who was staring at him and smiling.

“You’re being a creep.”

She stuck her tongue out, “Takes one to know one.”

“You tell your friends about the other night?”

He hated the way her face fell and she immediately curled in on herself.

“I haven’t told him if it’s, if that helps, maybe?”

She shrugged, “What *do* we tell them? Everything?”

He shrugged, “The truth, but how much is your choice.”

“I think they know. El-uh-Jane can get anything out of Hop. The guys were acting like they were trying to figure out how to interact with me when I said goodbye to them this morning.”

Billy glanced across the diner at Steve, who was taking an awfully long time to pick some songs.

He looked back at Max, "Steve doesn't know anything. He hasn't said anything to me about it. He's been very opinionated about me lately."

"You two are gross."

"Says the girl who threatened to beat up her boyfriend and his friends."

She threw a sugar packet at him.

He cackled.

"You guys seem to be getting along nicely."

Billy will not admit that both he and Max jumped at Steve's words. They really had no idea the guy had returned to their table.

"Have you guys decided on what you want to eat yet? Or do you need a minute?"

He sat down next to Billy. The latter was grateful for having him beside him instead of staring across the table at him.

"I want some fries and a milkshake! Please and thank you," Max stated.

Billy shrugged, "I'll know whenever the waitress shows up. It'll come to me."

Steve nodded and glanced around. Billy could see recognition on his face as he glanced at the other patrons of the diner. It shouldn't surprise him, knowing Steve's lived in Hawkins his whole life.

"Have you ever traveled with your parents?"

Billy jerked his attention to Max who was eyeing the direction Steve had been looking in the longest. He'd been looking at a family Billy's seen around at the grocery store, when he'd had to assist Susan.

"Only on actual family vacations. I've never been to a work trip. I grew up with nannies taking care of me up until I was about ten-ish. They thought I was capable enough on my own. They always leave

me enough money that I never know what to do with it.”

Max just looked at him, “Where, um, where do you go for family vacations?”

“Greece, or northern California. You ever been anywhere?”

Max snorted, “Yeah right, not everyone’s family’s made of money!”

“We went to Disneyland the first and only time the Hargrove-Mayfield clan did anything family oriented.”

“I’ve never been.”

Max piped up, “Billy should take you. You’d love it!”

Steve nudged Billy’s leg with his own under the table and smiled; “I’ll put it on my list of places I want to visit some day.”

“So you guys really don’t care that Billy has a huge crush on me?”

Steve felt the boy in question stiffen beside him.

Max raised a brow, “Mike owes me and Will five bucks a piece. Dustin owes me ten.”

“What were the bets?”

She grinned, “Will and I bet against Mike who denies that you like Steve, and we’re like anybody with eyes can see how you look at him the same way he does El. It’s gross. Really. As for Dustin, I bet that you guys would kiss soon. I know what you look like after you get that close with someone. You’re happier than you ever were in California.”

“Can we stop with the poking at me thing? It’s not fair when there’s two of you.”

“On one condition,” Steve said. He winked at Max before turning to Billy, “I need you to show me the dance from Footloose?”

Billy immediately glared at Max, and then glared at Steve, “I have no

idea what you're talking about."

X-X-X-X-X

Steve had dropped Billy and Max off at the Sinclair house before heading to the middle school to pick up the guys. They'd ran into Joyce on her break at work and he'd asked if it was okay to bring Will over to the Sinclair's. She'd agreed, but promised to have him home by six; Jim and El were coming over for dinner.

He was tapping along to the beat of the song on the radio as he waited for the kids to get out. He had no idea if Dustin knew if his mom was going to consider taking in Max and Billy. Claudia would appreciate the skills Billy would bring into the house. He knows how to do fix things. One thing he did learn from his father. Or rather had to learn because his father wasn't going to do it.

He smiled when he noticed the quad of nerds walking towards his car. They were a good bunch of kids. Whip smart, the whole bunch of 'em. He wasn't lying when he said they could plot world domination and he'd be none the wiser of it.

"Hey guys, have a good day?"

Will climbed in the front seat, uncontested against Dustin for once. He grinned at Steve. "Mike owes Max five bucks."

Steve felt his cheeks flame, "I know. Max told me at lunch."

They all started yelling over each other; "You saw Max?" "You didn't go to school?" "Was she chaperoning you and your boyfriend?"

"Yes. No, I didn't. And no, she didn't because he's not my boyfriend. Oh, and Dustin, you owe Max ten bucks."

Steve's new favorite sound will forever be the squeak that came out of Dustin in that moment. He couldn't help but laugh, like full belly laugh. It was great. It felt great.

The boys told him all about their days on the ride over to the Sinclair house. Neither Mr. or Mrs. Sinclair's cars were in the drive and Steve wasn't sure about leaving Billy to fend all of The Party by himself so he parked on the curb.

When they filed in the house and up to the living room they were all momentarily stunned at the scene in front of them--Erica was sitting cross-legged on the couch and Billy at on the floor in front of her. She was braiding his hair.

Steve would deny until the day he died that he was stunned by the fact that Billy was letting Erica play with his hair period, but that wasn't what made him freeze at the top of the stairs. He's never seen all of Billy's face before. There's always been a stray curl, or like five, or just hair in his face. Steve knew he thought the other boy pretty, but with all that hair out of his face, Billy was beautiful.

A flash broke everyone out of their stupor and Erica yelled, "Little Byers, you better have got my good side!"

Billy glanced up at Steve and smiled.

Will took another picture; Steve would request a copy later and keep it in his room.

"You guys ready to go back to school tomorrow?"

"Way to be a buzzkill Dustin!"

"Yes! I've been going stir crazy being cooped up, no offense to your house Lucas."

Steve moved into the kitchen and gathered some snacks for the kids. It was habit, no matter what house they were at, he always gathered up snacks and drinks for the kids.

When he returned he noticed Billy was no longer on the floor, but the kids were still catching Max up on the happenings of school. He set down his haul on the coffee table and tried to look like he wasn't looking around for Billy.

"Your boyfriend's checking out his hair in the mirror down the hall."

Steve spluttered a rebuttal but realized with this group it was pointless. He just accepted his flushed face and nodded, then headed down the hall to the bathroom.

He leaned on the frame once he got to it, taking in the sight of Billy running his fingers over the few rows of braids on top of his head.

Their eyes met in the mirror and they smiled at each other.

“This a style you’ve worn before?”

Billy shook his head, “Nah, wanted to, especially if you’re in the water, it would definitely help with knots, but it was always easier to just throw it up in a pony and go.”

“You going to wear it to school tomorrow?”

Billy laughed, “Pretty Boy, while my hair is fantastic, it will not hold this unless I have rubber bands. Erica doesn’t have any, so majority of her hard work will be gone by the time I get up in the morning.”

Steve’s fingers itched to reach out and touch. Billy must’ve seen it on his face.

“Come here, you can touch. I won’t mind.”

He reached out and latched onto Steve’s wrist to pull him closer, then led his hand up to his head.

Steve let his fingers graze over the rows on the other boy’s head.

“I can see all of your face with your hair pulled back.”

He hadn’t meant to say that out loud, let alone as breathlessly as he did--in Billy’s space like he was.

Billy smiled, “You like my face?”

Steve definitely felt his face flush, but nodded.

“Aww, you think I’m pretty, Stevie?”

Steve bit his bottom lip; Billy didn’t miss it.

“Guess I’m not the only pretty boy, huh?”

Billy grinned, Steve felt his heart race.

“I’m fucking gorgeous, Pretty Boy.”

They’d been steadily getting closer to each other; Steve could feel Billy’s breath on his face.

“Jesus, just kiss already!”

Both boys jumped back at turned to look at their intruder. She stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips, “Don’t stop on my account, I’ve been here long enough to know you two are idiots, but while I have your attention, the nerd herd is asking what’s taking so long.”

Erica Sinclair’s smile will forever terrify Steve for the rest of his life. She looks so innocent and sweet, but she’s not!

“You can’t rush beauty, Lady Sinclair.”

“Bet I can’t? Ma’s parking now, want me to tell her how I found you and Steve? At least the door was open, as per the rules of the house.”

Steve was confused, but would never admit to anyone that he found a blushing Billy Hargrove endearing. And wanted to find out if Erica could make him do it again.

“You are a queen Erica Sinclair. It’s a pleasure to know you.”

She just grinned up at Billy.

“Uh, you, your mom’s home?”

Both Billy and Erica turned to Steve and looked at him like he was stupid.

“Wow, Billy, you’re so lucky he’s pretty. We can’t all be the total package of looks *and brains*.”

Billy started laughing and Steve felt like he *should* be embarrassed,

but if it meant Billy was laughing and smiling like *that* , he'd let Erica give him shit forever.

Billy put an arm around Steve's shoulders, "Tell you what, give me and Princess a moment, and tell the little shits I said to keep room for Jesus. We'll be right out."

She eyed the both of them and nodded then turned and went back down the hall. They heard her say something but couldn't quite make out her words.

"She's right you know."

Steve looked at Billy in the mirror, "What do you mean?"

Billy smirked in the mirror; Steve felt the other boy's hands on his body. One cupping his head to turn it to face him, another moving to his lower back, pulling him in.

"You like me. I think you're pretty. We've already done it once, why not try again?"

Steve's mind immediately went back to the kiss in the basement from, was it really *yesterday* ? He nodded, "Okay."

Billy mocked his "okay," before pressing in closer and pressing his lips to Steve's.

Steve immediately moved his hands to grab onto Billy, wherever he could reach, which happened to be his waist and an arm.

He felt everything he felt the first time their lips touched, but so much *more* this time around.

He was much more aware of the lips moving against his, because this time, this time it was more than just a press of lips. Their lips were moving together, like they were dancing. A press and a pull, a quick opening of their mouths, breaths escaping; Steve felt like a whole fleet of butterflies were alive in his belly. Billy's hand that was on his cheek had moved to his hair, the other boy's fingers stroking along the strands. He felt a small nip on his bottom lip before Billy pulled back, eyes opening and so bright, cheeks flushed pink.

“Second’s the best,” he said and untangled himself from Steve, passing by on his way out of the bathroom. He made sure his hands slid across Steve’s lower back and lower abdomen.

Steve looked at himself in the mirror, his face was red, not pink, red. He took a deep breath, turned the faucet on and splashed some water on his face. It didn’t help. With a resigned sigh, he made his way back out to the living room.

The kids were all busy with homework, spread around the room. He opted to sit down across from Billy, who resumed his spot on the floor in front of Erica, who was fiddling with his hair again.

“Did *you* leave room for Jesus in the bathroom?” Max asked.

24. Mornin'

Notes for the Chapter:

uh, so this is the first time i'm apologizing for an awful chapter...it's definitely not my best, and i'm so sorry for that!

i've got a lot of BS going on at home...i have potential structural damage to the front wall of my house and my maintenance guy is USELESS. he has no idea what he's looking at when he comes into my house and refuses to give me information on the "contractor" they use. so i have the potential to be moving house when i can't afford anything remotely in the area...we'll see what happens.

my hubby lost his job so we're down to one income on top of the house BS we're dealing with, and i've been sick the last 5 days...woo life for kicking me in the ass.

so apologies for all that awfulness...

"You going to fill me in on what's been happening?"

Steve froze on the stairs and turned to look at John, who was sitting on the couch.

"One of your kid's calls late the other night, you race out of the house the last two mornings and don't return until late; talk to me kid."

Steve lets out a sigh that feels like a weight has been lifted off of his shoulders. He joins John on the couch and tucks his legs underneath him as he pulls a throw pillow to his chest.

"Is your friend okay, he sounded distraught?"

Steve nodded, then shrugged, “Uh, it was Dustin that called, but he was letting me know about Max and Billy.”

“Are they okay?”

Steve shook his head, “Billy, his, his dad hit him or something, and uh, Max, her mom, she’s never done it before, but, she, the woman hit Max.”

John didn’t say anything else. He waited for Steve to get it all out.

“Uh, Max, she, she called Hop, he came and got them, and they’re at the Sinclair’s for now. But that’s only temporary, and I don’t really recall hearing about foster homes in town so they might be sent away. Billy mentioned Max’s dad; he could just come in and take her away too.”

“Take a deep breath buddy, I need you to breathe.”

John watched as Steve took a few deep breaths. He could tell he was overwhelmed. He also knows that Steve was trying, and currently failing, not to cry.

“Shit, come here kiddo.” He held out his arms and Steve shifted across the couch. John wrapped him up in his arms and just held onto him.

“Let it out, buddy. No judgment zone.”

He heard Steve let out a small huff of a laugh before the boy was crying in his arms. Like getting his shirt wet from crying so much. And he let him. Lord knows that the boy needs to let his emotions out somehow.

Steve couldn’t remember the last time he was just held like this while he cried about something. Probably not since he was younger and one of his nannies.

Both of them lost track of time, but once Steve’s tears ceased to fall and his breaths regained some normalcy, he pulled back from John.

“Thanks.”

“Anytime, kiddo. Anytime.”

Steve wiped at his face with the bottom of his shirt.

“We kissed. Twice.”

John’s eyebrows shot up, “Was it that awful you had to cry about it?”

Steve laughed a little, “No!” He may have said that a little too fast, “I mean, the first one, felt amazing but the circumstances surrounding it weren’t the best.”

John smiled, “Ah, all that ridiculous bullshit that comes with a first kiss. How do you feel about all of it?”

Steve shrugged, “Like it shouldn’t matter Billy’s a boy. I like him. All of him. I told him I like all of him, even the angry, bitter, outbursts he had before this shitstorm.”

Steve ran his hand through his hair, “You know, they, they had to take photos of his body, for, for evidence when Ms. Kara took him and Max in to talk to Hop. I’ve never been more grateful that my parents are just neglectful before the other night. Like, I, I don’t, I can’t, I can’t imagine living with people who are supposed to be there for me and love me unconditionally, but instead choose to belittle and beat the shit out of me.”

“Me too, kiddo. But if your parents had ever raised a hand to you, I’d, I’d have stepped in and you’d be living with Rodney and I out east.”

“Thanks.”

“Tell you what, I’ll whip up something fast, or you up for going out?”

“Whip up something fast, please. And thank you!”

“You got it, kiddo. I’ll call you down when it’s ready.”

Steve nodded and got to his feet and headed up to his room.

X-X-X-X-X

Breakfast wasn't as awkward as he thought it was going to be. That is until the final member of the household chose to sit right beside him.

"Good morning, William."

This girl, he adored her and at the same time, he was completely terrified of her.

"Mornin'."

He took a sip of his coffee and spit it back out moments later as Ms. Kara spoke to him, "I heard you and Steve needed some prompting yesterday?"

Max was smiling into her cereal, as was Lucas, and Mr. Sinclair. Erica was eating away at her oatmeal like she wasn't the biggest shit stirrer Billy'd ever met.

He felt his cheeks flame with embarrassment. He quickly put his cup down and his hands in his lap.

"Oh sweetheart, calm down! I didn't mean anything by it, Erica's just being herself. She just told me that you two did keep the door open, which thank you, for following a house rule."

Max outright laughed this time. Mr. Sinclair hid a grin behind his newspaper, and Lucas was trying very hard not to laugh with Max. Erica was still eating like she hadn't done or said a thing.

He felt Ms. Kara's hand on his head, she pulled it gently into her side, "Now baby, what'd I tell you, I could care less about who you like, you could do way worse than Steve Harrington, trust me." She pat his cheek before stepping back towards the kitchen to grab her own plate of breakfast before sitting down across from Mr. Jacob at the opposite head of the table.

"We can get a sitter for Erica and we can have a proper introduction of your boyfriends, and in your case Lucas, both as the boyfriend of

Max, and Max, sweetie, as my son's girlfriend. Invite Steve over one evening and I'll make it happen."

Billy was certain that his and Max's faces were redder than her hair. Lucas looked he was sporting a heavy blush too.

"Doesn't that sound lovely, dear?" She was staring across the table at the newspaper Mr. Sinclair was currently hiding behind, laughing to himself about the whole situation.

"Of course, darling. Thursday work? Hate to be a mood killer but Claudia's given me her answer, that's all the county was waiting on."

The entire mood of the table shifted in a moment at his words. Mrs. Sinclair sat up straighter and put her fork down and her hands in her lap, "Jacob Sinclair, I swear on all that holy, if you tell me that woman said no and I have to take these children up to Indianapolis, I will sick your mama on you."

Mr. Sinclair put his paper down and picked up his mug of coffee and took a long sip. He placed it down and leveled Mrs. Sinclair with a look, "She said she'd be *honored to have one of Dusty's little friends, and her brother, stay with them for as long as they need to* . She just wants to make sure that *neither of you have cat allergies, Mews 2, and don't mind Dusty's science experiments all over* ."

Mrs. Sinclair let out a huff, "Don't you ever do that to me again! Oh, I am so relieved!"

Mr. Sinclair just smiled.

Billy felt his eyes draw immediately to Max, she looked as relieved as Ms. Kara must be feeling.

"Excuse me."

He stood up and ran down into the basement. He grabbed a pillow from the bed and moved to the wall adjacent and pressed his back to it and slid down to the floor.

He hugged the pillow to his chest and took a few deep breaths.

Rationally he knew this was *good* news. They had a roof over their heads, and if Max and Harrington were to be believed, Ms. Henderson was an awesome cook.

He didn't know how to deal with the mouthy kid that Harrington, Steve, seemed to favor. He'd realized from conversations overheard that Mr. Henderson was no longer in the picture, instead choosing to run off and abandon his wife and son. That's what he didn't know how to deal with.

"Billy?" It was Jacob.

"I'm okay."

Jacob walked over and sat down on the floor not too far from where Billy was sitting.

"Claudia is a force to be reckoned with. I assure you, once she's made privy to yours and Max's circumstances, well, let's just say she and Kara are protective Mama Bears about kids in their care."

Billy just nodded. He didn't know what to say.

"I know, I know you two have gotten comfortable here in the few days you've been here, and it's been wonderful having you, but, and believe me, if we could I'd keep the both of you, but the fine print of my job says I cannot house the children whose cases I'm working on.

"I've known Claudia long before she ever had Dustin, and she was a wonderful foster mom. She took a break when she found out she was pregnant with Dustin. You and Max will be in very good hands. She knows what's expected."

"Does she know what I did to the kids that night? The same one I apologized for about your son?"

Jacob looked at Billy and nodded, "Yes. Dustin, you will learn, has no filter and doesn't mind oversharing. She probably knows more about you already than you might ever plan on telling her. But she's not going to use any of that information against you. She's very fair, she'll judge you on your own impression, not off what a bunch of kids say."

He felt his face flush, “Does, is, will she have a, uh, an iss--”

Jacob smiled, “One of her brother’s is gay, she will not mind one bit that you have a massive crush on Steve Harrington. And really, Harrington? That kid is ridiculous, but I guess you can’t help what the heart wants. You ready to go back to school today?”

Billy shrugged, “I guess. I, I know I wanted to talk to my guidance counselor about seeing if I could just take the GED and be done. I don’t, I don’t want to be a bother to someone when I turn eighteen in a few months.”

“As long as you’re still in school, you have a place to live. If you want to try it on your own, you can, nobody’s going to stop you, but just know that if you’re still enrolled in high school, even turning 18, you’re good until the end of the school year. I’ll make sure of it, and if not, well, you’d be 18, and I can always make this a place for you. Until you know for sure what you want to do.”

Billy nodded, “Thanks, Mr. Sinclair. For, for everything.”

“Now ask me what you really want to ask me.”

Billy let out a deep breath, “When do we go to court?”

“Two weeks from Thursday. Your father and step-mother will be getting their summons by Friday afternoon.”

“Can we wait to tell Max? I just, I don’t want to bombard her with all of this.”

Jacob nodded, “Unless she asks me herself, I can keep quiet.” He got to his feet and held his hand out, offering to help pull Billy up to his own feet.

Billy tossed the pillow and stood up and was momentarily shocked at the hug Jacob was giving him.

“You’re not your father, Billy.”

Billy pulled back and nodded.

“You good, or do you need a minute? I also should let you know you guys have a ride, Steve’s coming by after he grabs Dustin.”

Billy hated that he smiled at Steve’s name, and then that he flushed with embarrassment at doing so in front of Mr. Sinclair.

He followed the older man up the steps and started gathering his things for school.

He noticed the paper bag on the counter that had his name, “Billy” and a little smiley face. He can’t remember the last time if any, that he had a lunch packed for him.

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm so sorry for (hopefully) the only filler chapter i will give to y'all!

25. a n

I'm going to be a little MIA, I'm currently trying to figure out what is going on with my kidneys. Been to 2 ERs in the span of 3 days earlier this week.

I have no energy or strength most days. I've been mostly stuck in bed. My left hand is swollen from unknown reasons, and any time I can get up to work on my computer, it's been to catch up with coursework.

I'm hoping that I get answers soon and I can get back to this. I really dig writing this story and I'm feeling pretty bad for having to step back for a moment. But my hubby constantly reminds me that my body's health is more important than anything else right now.

I'm not abandoning ship! I promise! I'm slowly adding pieces of the next chapter.

26. You Good?

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you guys so much for the well wishes!! I still don't have any answers, but I did get a whole list of "issues" along with my unknown problem. I'm going to a follow-up tomorrow morning and hopefully can get in to a specialist sooner than later.

Today's the first time I feel human again in the last 2 weeks! I didn't need my hubby to literally do everything for me today. We even got out of the house for a bit, something I haven't been able to do (barring the 3 ER visits over the last 7 days). I overdid it, but it was worth it. I enjoyed the fresh air and sun on my face and just being able to go up and down my stairs in my house without having to stop for like 10 minutes every 3 steps. Oof.

Without further ado, I present the next chapter. It's not all bad!

“Hey Buddy, pal, uh, you know once we grab everybody at the Sinclair’s, you’re going to have to sit in the back, right?”

Steve looked over at Dustin, hoping the younger boy wouldn’t use his normal dramatics.

“Your *boyfriend* can call shotgun just like *everybody else* is going to try to do!”

Steve laughed, “You can be the one to tell him that.”

“Besides, what makes you think Max isn’t going to call dibs the moment they come outside? She’s been getting better and better at

calling it.”

Steve knew they were only a few streets away from Maple, “You think Max is doing okay?”

He could tell the kids knew more than he does about what happened. Billy hasn’t said much about *that* night. Dustin’s face just then, schooling it to look more nonchalant than he really was, was telling.

“I mean, we’ve known all along that she’s tough, tougher than all of us. Uh, El, she, she told us what happened. She, she invaded Hopper’s mind when he slept. She did it because it’s how she shows she cares about her friends. Mike had to convince her, make her *promise* that Neil and Susan had to go through court first before she could do anything to them.”

“Whoa, guys! You, you can’t just sick Eleven onto every problem that comes up! That’s kind of the point Hop’s making by adopting her! He wants her to gain some sense of normal!”

“Look, just because your boyfriend hasn’t been as honest with us about that night doesn’t mean Max hasn’t either. El asked her about it and she told us. All of us.”

“For the last time, he’s not my boyfriend!”

“Is he even your friend if he can’t tell you about this?”

Steve hated that they’d pulled up just as Dustin spat that question out. He hadn’t meant to sound angry at the kids for knowing more than him about that night. The one that had Billy and Max packing up and moving houses on a friggin Tuesday. Or whatever day it was.

Why hadn’t Billy said anything to him about that night? They were building something in their letters together from class, and even afterward, finding out who the other was, and whatever it is between them that’s had them kiss. *Twice* .

Mr. Sinclair was walking towards his car across their lawn, he waved as Dustin raced by into the house. Steve got out and walked around to the other side.

“Good morning, Mr. Jacob.”

“Hi, Steve. Erica tells me that you and Billy are getting quite close.”

Steve felt his entire body burn with embarrassment.

“I guess.”

Jacob smiled. Steve felt even more uncomfortable.

“Kara and I would love to have you over for dinner tomorrow night. As a getting to know you meal. Kara’s arranged for Erica to stay with one of her friends for the evening.”

“Like uh, like, like a meeting the parents kind of dinner?”

Jacob chuckled, “Exactly like that.”

Steve really wished that the kids could all come parading out of the house right now, but he had a feeling that Erica or even Ms. Kara were keeping an eye out to make sure that they saw Steve at least nod in the affirmative, or see Mr. Jacob returning with a smile. Or something.

“I got, I have to run it by my Uncle John. He’s been staying with me since, uh, for a bit.”

“Tell you what, when I grab the kids from school this afternoon you let me know?”

“Yes, sir.”

Steve had a feeling that he’d better say yes regardless of how much shit John was going to give him. He just hoped this dinner wouldn’t be near as awkward as dinner had been with Barb’s parents. Especially since they kept going out of Nancy’s sense of guilt.

He watched the older man walk across the yard and pick up the newspaper that was tossed off towards the garage. All it took was a few nights for the Sinclair’s to warm up to both Max and Billy. He wonders if Billy’s conversation was just as awkward.

He noticed the front door open before Jacob got back inside, it was Billy. He immediately felt himself straighten up his posture and tried to look less mortified than how he was actually feeling. He smiled as Billy left the door open for Jacob and headed in Steve's direction.

"Mornin' Pretty Boy. Thanks for the lift."

Steve shrugged, "I was already passing by, figured I'd save Ms. Kara the trouble of corralling all of you."

Billy glanced over his shoulder at the house, "So uh, you busy tomorrow evening?"

He noticed the apples of Billy's cheeks tinged pink.

"Yeah, I uh, I have dinner plans."

"*Oh* , anybody I know?"

Steve hated that Billy didn't catch on immediately. He wasn't going to lie though, the fact that Billy was a bit jealous turned Steve's morning around.

"Yeah, about this tall, bit of an asshole, you know."

Billy bit his bottom lip, "You're the asshole! I hope your conversation was a shit ton more awkward than mine!"

Both boys smiled and laughed with each other.

Steve reached out to smooth the collar of Billy's denim jacket without even thinking about it. Billy let him.

He didn't drop his hand until the door slammed behind Billy and the nerd herd was making their way towards his car.

He didn't want to think about the look they just shared. It was heated. It was full of things he doesn't know if they could ever say out loud.

"Shotgun!" Max called out while she headed towards the car.

The collective groans from the boys had Steve laughing to himself.

“Not today pipsqueak,” Billy said, turning to face the approaching entourage.

She raised her brow, “Rules of the game haven’t changed just because your boyfriend’s giving us a ride. I called it fair and square.”

She glanced over to Steve, his car, his ultimate decision. He scratched at his chest.

“Technically she called it first.”

“But *you* told *me* that I *had* to ride in the back because you wanted your boyfriend to ride up front with you! I got in the car first, I technically still have shotgun!” Dustin blurted out.

“Aww, Princess, you wanted me to sit up front with you? I wanted to sit behind whoever rode shotgun and kick them the whole ride to school. You’re so thoughtful.”

Steve knew his face was now the color of his car. He was sure of it.

“Wow, just for that, Lucas and Max are the only ones I’m taking to school.”

He turned and walked around to the driver’s door and smiled to himself at the spluttering Dustin and Billy were doing. Max climbed into the back with Lucas and Steve buckled in.

He didn’t even wait for them to buckle in before he pulled away from the curb, watching the shock appear on Dustin and Billy’s faces in his rearview mirror.

Of course he stopped just a few feet away but the looks on their faces made his day.

He watched in his rearview mirror as both boys walked quickly to the car, Dustin offering Billy the front seat. Steve felt like it was something more than just giving up shotgun, but he didn’t want to dwell on that too much.

“So, hey, Lucas, uh, your sister’s not going to be at dinner tomorrow is she?” Steve asked, glancing in his rearview mirror.

He listened as the trio in the back snickered with each other before Lucas gave his response.

“No, Mom’s uh, she made arrangements for Erica to stay with a friend. It’s going to be a whole night of who’s who at the table.”

“This the first time you’ve ever had a meet the parents dinner?” Steve asked him.

“Yes.”

This time Billy and Steve shared a look and a small laugh, “You guys will be just fine,” said the latter of the two.

“Can I come over just to watch this shitshow? It sounds like it’s going to be amazing!” Dustin said from the backseat.

X-X-X-X-X

“Mr. Wogan, please excuse the interruption, is Steve Harrington in class?”

“Yes.”

“Can you please excuse him to the office, thank you.”

Steve hated the sounds his classmates made. He found it even worse than when the teacher’s asked you to stay after class. He hadn’t done anything, not to his recollection, that would warrant being called to the office.

He’s been on his best behavior. Unless something happened to one of his parents. His dad has been moving things to the city, could something have happened to him? Or his mom? She was still out east with Uncle Rodney at their place.

He packed up his belongings and left the class, ignoring the mutterings of his classmates. He wanted to go to his locker and drop off some of his things but he really didn't know if he had the time. Would they know he made a detour?

He decided against it and headed directly to the office.

Upon his arrival he noticed a man and woman standing outside the office, the woman's hair reminded him of Max's. Shit, were these their parents?

The office door opened and out stepped Hop and the principal.

"Oh, there you are Mr. Harrington, if you could just pop into my office I'll be in in just a moment. I just have to finish up here with the Chief and Mr. and Mrs. Hargrove."

He knows he should've recognized them in passing, dropping the kids off at the arcade and taking them home afterward, but usually it's always been Billy. On the odd occasion, he'd see someone else pick Max up, or take her home himself, but he'd rarely seen their parents in passing.

He headed in, catching the end of, "I'm terribly sorry Mr. Hargrove, but the law clearly states that your son is in state custody until court, you're not allowed to be on school property to ask for him, and to be clear, Maxine as well."

He knew he held the door a little too long, but the look he shared with Ms. Wathens, the secretary, they were both curious as to what was going on.

"Go on in sweetie, I won't tell we were eavesdropping if you won't," she said with a wink and got busy with whatever it was she was attempting to look busy doing.

Steve went into the office and sat down in a chair, plopping his backpack on the floor beside his feet.

Did the Hargrove's really think they could come and get their kids from school like that? Had that worked before? Was that something that had happened to Billy back in California? He's alluded to things

not being the best, and they were removed from their house; what kind of people were Mr. and Mrs. Hargrove?

Mr. Edwards returned to his office a few moments later with a sheepish smile on his face as if to apologize for Steve having to witness that.

“I’m going to be frank here Mr. Harrington, uh, Jim, the uh Chief, let me know that you and Billy Hargrove are friends?”

Steve nodded, “Yeah. Kind of new, but yes.”

“Good, better than your history together. Glad you boys can put water under the bridge and all that. Okay, Steve, I’m sure you’re aware that Billy and his sister are in the care of someone not their parents.”

“Yes, sir, they’re with the Sinclair’s. I babysit Lucas and Erica, and their friends sometimes. It’s hard to keep things under wraps with that group.”

Steve didn’t like the smile directed at him.

“I’m excusing you and Billy to leave early. I know this is a lot to ask you, but Jim said to call it a favor for him. They need to move house today. Safety is the main reasoning. Jim’s waiting outside in his truck for the two of you, and I’ve already had Ms. Wathens call for Billy to come on down. I’ll personally notify your teacher’s this afternoon. You’re a good kid, Steve.”

“Uh, thanks, Mr. Edwards.”

“Mr. Edwards, Billy’s here,” Ms. Wathens’ voice sounded from the small speaker on the desk.

“Send him in, thanks.”

The door opened up behind Steve and he was met with a confused Billy Hargrove.

“Sorry to disrupt your day Mr. Hargrove, but it has come to my attention that uh, well, your parents were just here and I had to have

the Chief of Police escort them off school property. Mr. Harrington's going to go with you to gather your sister and then you'll be going to your new foster home."

Steve watched as Billy's shoulders tensed up at the mention of *your parents* and as his eyes immediately darted from Mr. Edwards' to his own. He never broke eye contact. He tried his best to convey to Billy that he was here. Right here. He wasn't going anywhere. Not unless he wanted him to.

"I'll just give you two a moment. I'll walk you out when you're ready."

He got up and closed his door behind him.

"Billy?"

He shook his head, "Don't."

Steve nodded, knowing the other boy saw. He wasn't going to push.

He hated the emotions rolling over the other's face. Specifically, the fear that seemed to be creeping in around the edges and staying.

Steve didn't care anymore, he got to his feet and got right in Billy's space and pulled him into a hug. Billy stood frozen for a few seconds before his body went lax in Steve's arms, and he felt arms wrap around his waist and a face buried itself in the crook of his neck.

He could feel Billy's breathing coming out in rapid, hot puffs. He just held on.

"He can't get you anymore. *He can't* . Hop won't let him. I, *I* won't let him."

He couldn't make out whatever Billy was muttering against his neck but he kept rubbing up and down the other boy's back, offering him comfort the best he could.

He watched the clock on Mr. Edwards' wall, they stood there wrapped around each other for five minutes. When the second hand hit the '9' Billy pressed a kiss to the juncture where his shoulder met his neck and pulled away, but not leaving the embrace they were

sharing.

“Thanks. Let’s go get Max.”

“You good?”

Billy nodded and slowly pulled his arms back away from Steve, who followed suit.

“They did this before, before we moved. Cali’s a big state, lots of suburbs, lots of people to get lost in the system. Guess he thought he could try it here. Guess he doesn’t know about the curse of small towns, huh?”

Steve’s gut told him to be alarmed at Billy’s smile, but he didn’t want to push his luck. He just nodded and gestured towards the door.

“Hop’s out front waiting for us.”

“Figured.”

Steve watched as Billy’s entire demeanor changed before they left the office--he’d wondered if Billy always wore defense mechanisms on a daily basis. It would explain a lot if he did.

Where Billy went, Steve followed.

Steve was the only one who returned Hop’s small wave when they left the school. The back door of his truck opened and out tumbled Max who crossed the distance between the truck and where Steve and Billy were walking.

“Jim got me before he came here. I saw them, Neil looked pissed, but Officer Callahan was escorting them home with strict orders to keep an eye on their movements from the house. I told you Jim could help.”

Steve watched as the step-siblings hugged each other in relief that the other was there.

“All, all, I thought, I, I thought it was going to be California all over again!”

Steve met Max's eyes as she peered around Billy to look over at him.

"And I told you, he can't do that here. Not anymore. Come on, you're going to love Claudia!"

"Do you know all of their moms? You know it's weird all your dude friends' moms love you right? Usually, moms don't like the girls their sons bring home."

"Kara adores Steve, and Claudia absolutely loves him!"

Steve felt himself burn in embarrassment. He knew he and Billy had matching blushes if the shit eating grin Max had was any indication.

"They're all yours Chief," said Mr. Edwards, who looked like he was trying to forget that entire exchange.

"Thanks," said Hop.

Max and Billy untangle themselves and head towards the truck. Steve glanced out into the parking lot and then at Hop.

"Not right now kiddo, I uh, I don't trust the old man. My vehicle only; I'll swing you back around for it later."

Steve nodded and climbed into the truck, opting to sit with Billy in the back.

He tried not to startle when he felt a hand latch onto his once the truck was in motion. He didn't draw attention to Billy, but he did curl his fingers and held on tight.

He'd be whatever Billy needed him to be.

27. Chapter 27

Summary for the Chapter:

apologies for the delay!

i adore dustin's mom on the show like some kind if ridiculous! i hope i did her justice!

i hope you guys like it...and i'll get to the next bit when i have a moment!

still awaiting answers (5 doctors telling me they don't understand what's going on with my body, and that my string of symptoms is weird is how my life's going)...we're at the stage of ruling out autoimmune diseases and cancers...within the next few weeks i've got 2 specialists appointments to get to...my mindset at the moment is all over the place, but i'm focusing on day by day. my babies at work are full of so much love and they keep me on my toes! (i work with 2.5 year olds m-f, and i love it!)

“Oh Max, sweetie, how are you? This must be the big brother! He’s so handsome! Hi, honey, I’m Claudia, this is Tews, and Dusty’s still at school. I called to tell him to take the bus home today. And Stevie, how are you, sweetheart?”

“Hi, Ms. Claudia!” Max said.

“I’m good,” said Steve.

Billy had no idea what just happened. The Chief knocked on a door and this woman just barged out the door and scooped Max up in both

arms all the while holding a cat? Yes, a cat.

“Hello, ma’am. I’m Billy, thank you for taking us in.”

“You three must be hungry, you left during the first lunch period; I whipped something up for you, so come on in. You can put your bags in your rooms, and I’ll meet you in the kitchen. Come on in!”

Billy looked at Jim who just offered a smile as if to say *have fun kid* . He glanced at Max only to find that she’d already started dragging her bags into the house behind Mrs. Henderson. And Steve, the traitor was already heading off into the house.

Had he really heard her correctly-- *rooms* ? He gets his own room here? Three kids with their own rooms? Who was this lady? Where was Mr. Henderson?

He quickly grabbed his two bags, thanks to Ms. Kara, and followed the ladies into the house.

“I’ll stop by after my shift this evening, see how things are going and take Steve home, take care, Claudia, kids,” Jim yelled behind Billy and closed the door behind him.

Billy doesn’t know why he flinched when the door shut, Jim didn’t slam it.

Maybe because this was *Steve ’s kid ’s* house. He was finding it harder to not apologize for that night at the Byers’ house.

He heard Max and Mrs. Henderson talking, she was asking Max which room she wanted. He followed the sound of their voices and noticed Max go into a room at the end of a hall, across from a door that definitely looked like it belonged to a teenage boy.

“There you are, Billy, your new room is going to be just around the corner. I’m sorry the three of you have to share a bathroom, but you have your own space! Jim said you have a car, we can go get it later and you can park in the driveway, no worries.”

He followed Mrs. Henderson down the hall and opened the door that was next to the open bathroom door.

He froze in the threshold.

The bed was already made and there was a set of dressers, a closet, and a small desk. He remembers that Mrs. Henderson was a foster parent before she had her son, but it's another thing to be presented with probably the nicest bedroom he'd ever had in his life.

He jumped at the hand on his shoulder.

It was Max.

"Hey shitbird."

"Hey asshole."

They shared a small smile between them.

"We're safe here Billy. I promise. This room suits you. You can put up some new posters if you want, really make this space your own."

He just nodded and finally stepped into the room and put his bags on the bed. He turned around to say something else to her but she'd already gone. He sat down beside his bags and took a deep breath.

This town was only so big, how safe were they here? Max has her friends, and their parents adore her, and so he knows that if needed she'd have plenty of places to hide from Neil and Susan. And he, he has Steve. Steve *Harrington*. One of the largest houses in Hawkins because his parents make stupid amounts of money. All it would take would be the whisper of the name Harrington and Neil would be staking out that house to get a glimpse of Billy coming and going. He'd lie in wait and snatch him up and nobody would ever see him again.

He smells something, breaking this train of dark thoughts and gets up and find out just what smells so good.

He walks through the house and finds Max, Steve, and Mrs. Henderson in the kitchen. There are a few stools at a breakfast bar, and he sits on the empty one, in the middle. He's now sitting between Steve and Max.

“Just in time, sweetie, I was about to plate up some lasagna. It’s leftovers from last night, but I think it tastes better the day after anyway. Dusty’s tired of lasagna, so I’ll pack the rest up to send home with Stevie. You really need to take better care of yourself,” Claudia was saying as she plated up two large pieces of lasagna for Billy and Max, Steve was already digging in on his own piece. She even made a plate for herself and pulled the extra stool around to the other side of the counter.

She sat down after making sure they had everything, even going so far as to give them each a napkin before they dug in. Billy did not know what to do with this kind of attention.

“Jim and Jacob have informed me of your situation, and your parents are getting their subpoenas for court tomorrow afternoon. I will tell you both right now, your parents set even a toe on my property while you’re in my care, they will be locked up. I don’t take kindly to abuse of children.

“Now, we’ll get your things from their house too. Jim will let me know when he’s got them down at the station for questioning this evening. We can get everything you want then. He’ll send over one of his officers and if he’s taken your car keys Jim will confiscate them. Susan let it slip to me that the car is in your name so they cannot keep it from you.

“We’ll make sure we get you some nice outfits for court, and don’t you worry your heads about it. We’re going to get through this. Now Max, sweetheart, I do have to ask, and they’re going to bring this up in court, how do you feel about your father, your biological father?”

Billy saw her tense beside him and wanted to yell at Mrs. Henderson for bringing up that asshole.

“Uh, I mean, he’s my dad, but he’s not, he can’t, he’s never been the greatest dad in the whole world. He’s pretty shit actually. I don’t, I don’t want to go with him. I don’t want that to even be an option.”

Billy still hadn’t finished bringing his fork to his mouth, still frozen in a combination of shock and rage at the mention of Max’s father. The man was wasted all the time and not always just from booze. He was

an addict in every sense of the word and often chose to get high over taking care of his wife and daughter, hence the new Hargrove-Mayfield family.

He felt a hand rest on his thigh and glanced over at Steve. He immediately relaxed and finally took his bite.

“Not a problem, we can use that against him. Unfortunately, the system looks for living relatives, and since he’s still alive he’ll be notified, but we can make sure he’s proven unfit.”

She seemed very confident in a system that, back out west, Billy lost quite a few friends to. Those living relatives in other parts of Cali, or even states, they were just packed up and moved. Perhaps Max stood a chance here. She did have a great support system with her little band of nerds; Billy knew they’d protect her at all costs.

“Billy, honey, you’re a bit trickier since you’re eighteen in a few months. Now, that doesn’t mean that we can’t help you out. I have no problem signing up for the two of you until you both age out. And get out of your head because I’ve heard enough about you from Dusty and his friends about *that night* .

“I don’t like bullies young man, but I also understand that night you had a particularly bad encounter with your father. There is no shame in how you feel okay? You *feel* angry, you *be* angry. You *feel* sad, you *feel* sad. You want to cry, *you cry* . You’re not *weak* or whatever other derogatory names you’ve been called your entire life just because you have emotions.

“Now, *Steve Harrington* , what’s this Dusty’s been telling me about you and Billy here?”

Billy choked on the food in his mouth and looked at Mrs. Henderson who was glancing between the two of them with a smile on her face, patiently awaiting Steve to answer.

“What’s he been saying, exactly?” Steve asked.

“That Erica caught you two kissing the other day and that he owed Max ten dollars. Is this new? Established? Will you be coming over

more often? I only ask because we both know that Dusty will still want to spend time with you, you know how he looks up to you. I suppose that Billy can go to your house too, we'll just have to initiate a curfew, let's say nine on school nights and eleven-thirty on the weekend. That way you can call me to let me know that you'll be here in fifteen minutes, any longer and I'll call Jim to make sure your father's not abducted you."

How does this woman talk and not breathe?

Billy just nodded because 9 pm was definitely a shit ton better than the six-thirty the old man implemented.

He was pretty sure that his face was pink, he felt a little warm around his cheeks.

His only solace was that Steve was equally, if not more, pink-cheeked than him.

"It's pretty new, and I guess so? I don't really know what to say here. *Wait*, Mr. Hargrove can kidnap his own kid?"

"It's a sad circumstance that happens quite often with children who go into foster care. But, thankfully, we live in a small town. Meaning that pretty much unless the judge deems the Hargroves fit parents, you will not be returning to that house, and they can't do anything about it. You're both very safe here."

-X-X-X-X-X-X-

"Think they'll settle in well with the Henderson's?"

Steve looked over at Hop and shrugged. He really wasn't sure.

"Max will, I think her and Dustin will be really good friends, and Lucas' two favorite people are now under the same roof."

"What about your boy?"

Steve felt his stomach flip a little. Would he always feel like this when someone questioned him about Billy?

“Uh, I think he’ll eventually be okay. I mean, Claudia’s probably going to be the first *good* mom figure in his life. He doesn’t, I don’t, I don’t think he knows or gets *how* to take care and love from people who don’t abuse him?”

Steve hated that those words had to come out of his mouth. He knows that Billy shared things out in confidence that Steve would never share, but this, *this was Billy*, and his safety was at stake. He kept running his fingers along the edge of the container Claudia had given him.

“I can get that. Want me to follow you home, make sure you get in no problem?”

“Aren’t you already late for El?”

“I radioed, let her know I was protecting Max. She asked me if I needed her help. She’ll understand if I’m protecting you too.”

Steve smiled, that was a very El thing to say.

“I think I should be alright, my uncle’s still here so I’m not home alone. Thanks though.”

Hop nodded and they listened to the radio the rest of the way to school.

When they arrived, Steve realized that school was still in session, “Do I have to go back to class?”

“Technically you were excused for the rest of the afternoon, I mean, I’d take the gift of freedom and just roll with it. Besides, don’t think this snafu messes with dinner plans tomorrow night with the Sinclair’s. Claudia will either bring them over, or Billy will drive them.”

“Jacob thinks I’m an idiot.”

“Can you blame him? Kid, before all this upside down bullshit, you were an asshole to the fullest esteem. Don’t get me wrong, I like the kid you are now, but I also kept tabs on you. I couldn’t touch you ‘cause your old man made it very clear he’d throw money and

lawyers at my station if we ever carted you in for *teenage actions that you'd grow out of* . His words.

“Look, I was young and ignorant of the ways of the world myself. My own experience is a combination of you and Billy, but what I’m saying is, I get it. You can show and prove to Jacob that you’re not the spoiled little rich boy this town probably still thinks of you as. Your parents may be absent way too often, but they’ve made it very clear that anything comes back to you, they have no problem throwing money and lawyers at people to shut them up on your behalf.”

Steve nodded. Mostly because he didn’t know what to say, but more so because he knew that even if something should happen where he’d actually need his parents money and lawyers, *they* still wouldn’t put their lives on hold and come home to be there for *him* .

“It’s stupid that nobody can know that we saved them. That, that I’m not, I’m not stupid, or, that I can’t do anything. I, I protected those kids! I kept them safe. I brought them home!”

Hop stopped right behind Steve’s car.

“Hey, Steve, look at me. Kid, don’t, don’t hold the weight of what other people think on your shoulders. That weight will crush you for the rest of your life. When I was your age, I wouldn’t have done half the things you did dealing with this upside down garbage. Just be yourself, Jacob will come around. He’s just protective of kids he likes, and for some reason, he likes your boy.”

Steve felt himself flush, but he wasn’t sure if it was from embarrassment or humility, or some combination of the two.

“Thanks, Hop.”

Jim nodded, “Call the house when you get home, you might beat me, but El can tell me you made it home. I’m not kidding about the old man, he just, something doesn’t sit right about him. I’ve learned things, and I guarantee if he’d caught wind of you and Billy, he’d do damage to the both of you.”

Steve nodded. He understands where Hop's coming from. He's never interacted personally with Neil Hargrove, but he's seen him around town enough and seen how the man treats those around him.

28. Can I Think About It?

Notes for the Chapter:

First and foremost, THANK YOU for your kindest of words and well wishes!

The only answer I have is that it's not cancer, at the moment. I'll take that as a win even though it's a pin we might have to revisit. But right now, that's not it. Now we begin ruling out autoimmune and other such things.

I'm still trying to find answers; I have a specialist appointment this week, and another the following week. Hopefully one of them can shed some light on what's going on.

I had to take a break, like I hadn't even kept up with reading some of my subscriptions on here. I just needed to get my head back on. But I feel like I'm relatively back to myself, not 110% as before, but I'm definitely getting there!

My apologies if this chapter is a little rough around the edges, as it's been a work in progress for a month and worked on in choppy bits. It took me 4x to even get this far with it. But I've found my groove again. So much so that there might be another update later this evening. ;)

"I know that you don't want to hear this from me, but you looked fine eight shirts ago, buddy."

Steve flipped John off, who was leaning in the doorway with a smile on his face.

"You know Billy already likes you, right?"

Steve took off his blue button up and pulled the pastel pink polo he'd tried on eight shirts ago on.

"How, how were you when you first met Rodney's family?"

John laughed and came into the room and sat down on the edge of Steve's bed.

"His sister didn't believe I wasn't an escort. She thought he was paying me to be there with him. His parents died in an accident when he was in his late twenties, so I never got to meet them, but Jeanie, his sister, she loves me. His niece adores me too. They come out every summer to spend time with us."

"You still didn't tell me how you felt when you first met them."

Steve plopped down in his desk chair and turned to face John.

"Like, Jacob already thinks I'm an idiot, and I'm pretty sure that if she could, Kara would adopt me too, or she'd have joint custody with Claudia."

John smiled, "So you're worried his newly minted father figure isn't going to like you coming over as the boyfriend?"

Steve groaned and put his face in his hands, "There's shit that went down the last few years I am not allowed to talk about like government-issued non-disclosure documents can't talk about, but before all that, I was the biggest spoiled asshole in town."

"So you're fighting an old reputation that preceded you, but you've changed since then. Just show them who you are now and you'll be fine."

"Hop said the same thing. Just be me."

"Buddy, I was just as nervous as you right now the first time he took me to meet his sister. My stomach was in knots and my palms were sweaty the whole drive over to their little house. Speaking of, want me to drop you off? I'm pretty sure that Billy could give you a ride home? Or do you want the known escape of having your car out front?"

Steve nodded, "A ride would be nice."

"Let's go then, you're going to be late."

They were halfway to the Sinclair house when Steve ran a hand through his hair and he panicked, he hadn't done a thing to it--his hair.

"Does my hair look okay? I completely forgot about doing it before we left!"

John laughed, "Jesus kid, your boy's already smitten with you; I don't think he's going to care what your hair looks like."

They both saw Billy as John pulled up to the curb out front of the Sinclair house. He was smoking. He must be nervous because Kara doesn't like smoking around her house.

"See, he's nervous too. You're going to be just fine. Kara already likes you and she's the one who you really need to go through. Mamas like her are forces of nature. If you want an early out, call me and I'll be right here. Deal?"

Steve nodded and opened his door to get out, "Thanks Uncle John, for, for everything."

He shut the door and waved bye to John before turning around to face the house.

He will never admit that he was all twisted up inside, or that he felt butterflies when Billy stood up and began to approach him.

"Hey, Princess, you ready?"

Steve shook his head and Billy smiled.

"Aww, sweetheart, are you nervous?"

Steve took a few more steps closer to Billy, feeling a little more at ease in the other boy's personal space.

"Are you?" Steve asked.

He watched Billy shrug but could tell by the look in his eyes that he was just as nervous about this. He reached out to playfully shove him but Billy caught his wrist and pulled him closer, placing his other hand on Steve's hip.

"I'm much better now that you're actually here and didn't stand me up. Max almost brought your nerd with her. Ms. Claudia even braided her hair. Jesus, we're lucky Ms. Kara made plans for Erica."

Steve wanted nothing more than to press forward just enough to where he could press a kiss to the corner of Billy's mouth, but he wasn't sure what the protocol was for tonight. He knew they were being introduced as each other's boyfriend, but was he allowed to show his affection?

"Steve, come back to me."

He blinked a few times, Billy coming into focus as he returned to the moment. Billy reached up and brushed a few strands of hair out of his--Steve's--face.

"There you are, where'd you go Pretty Boy?"

Steve felt his cheeks flush, "I, uh, I was thinking 'bout kissing you actually."

"Is that so?"

"Oh my gosh, get that look off your face! I said thinking, not actually doing anything about it."

Steve would forever adore the smile he put on Billy's face.

"We can make it quick before heading inside; I'm pretty sure at least one of them is looking out one of those windows."

"Nope, we can build up for it later. I might need a ride home," Steve said with a wink and pulled away from Billy.

"You have the nerve to call me an asshole. You play dirty, Harrington."

They smiled at each other and headed inside.

He followed Billy into the house and noticed that Lucas and Max were sitting next to each other on the loveseat. He waved at them and noticed they were holding hands.

“Glad you could finally join us, fellas,” said Jacob, startling Steve.

“Hi Mr. Sinclair, thanks for having me,” Steve said in his charming voice. He hated that it reminded him of the first time he met the Wheeler’s.

“Steve Harrington is that you I hear, you best get in this kitchen and come say hello!”

He made quick work of the stairs and into the kitchen where he took in Kara Sinclair, putting the finishing touches on whatever smelled heavenly on the stove.

“Hello Ms. Kara, how are you this evening?”

She pointed her wooden spoon at him, “Don’t put that charm on me, it’s not going to work.”

He loosened his shoulders and smiled, “Good, it was a little tense out there.”

She smiled, “I told him to be nice. I already like you, plus Claudia vouches for you too.”

He glanced over his shoulder, out into the living room, taking in the four occupants talking with each other.

“Jim called, about yesterday. I can’t tell you how refreshing it was to hear that beast of an engine pull up to the house earlier. You have a good day at school?”

Steve hated the pity that he and Kara shared as their eyes met.

“Yeah, uh, yes, I think I’m just getting antsy with graduation looming to soon.”

He didn't miss the way her eyes darted over his shoulder into the living room.

"You have plans?"

He shook his head, "My dad wants me to go work for him but, I don't, I want to do something that means something, not just earn me stupid amounts of money. I'm not, like, I know I'm not stupid, but I don't think I'd make it in college. At least not at one where my dad's money turns a blind eye to how dumb on paper I actually am."

"I'm going to stop you right there, you will not stand in my kitchen and degrade yourself like that, you hear me?" She waited for him to nod, "Good, now, you can always learn a vocational trade if you'd rather do something meaningful. I can always pay you to babysit Erica for me. She's chased off the majority of the young ladies in this town."

He knew what she wasn't saying--would he stick around? Was he leaving, getting out at his first chance? Even without Billy in the equation, Steve couldn't imagine leaving Hawkins behind, not without a proper send-off.

"She terrifies me, you know that, right? She could take over the world and I'd do whatever she asked because that's how terrifying she is!"

"Don't I know it! She gets it from Jacob's mother. She has a good heart, beautiful soul, but lord, her determination knows no bounds, and I love her for it. She will move mountains. That's not a no to babysitting. You'd take her to and from school, and her extracurriculars--dance, Girl Scouts, and help with homework and such until Jacob or I get home, and possible some Friday or Saturday nights so we can have a date night."

"Can I think about it?"

She smiled and nodded, "Of course you can, now, grab me a few plates from the cabinet to your right and let's get this show started."

He followed her instructions, which also led to him setting the table,

in which Billy got up to help when he saw him come out with things in his hands.

Once the table was set and Kara had plated up everyone's food--salads and spaghetti with garlic bread. Steve was sure that she made the bread herself because it didn't look anything like the kind his mom kept in their freezer.

Steve wasn't stupid, he knew that he and Max were the main ones in the hot seats, so when Billy and Lucas sat next to each other, the latter to his father's right, he knew to sit down across from Billy.

It wasn't awkward, exactly, but it wasn't entirely comfortable. He knew that he couldn't do what he usually did when he met the parents of the girls he'd dated.

"Ms. Kara, this smells and looks delicious!" Max piped up.

"Thanks, sweetie, it's my momma's recipe. And I know you don't like cucumbers so I didn't put any in your salad, and Billy, I kept the black olives out of yours."

"Ahem," Jacob cleared his throat and gestured for hands, "We say grace before our meals, if that's alright with you, Steve?"

"Not a problem."

He glanced away from Jacob to Billy, who was holding out his hands for Lucas and Kara to take, head already bowed. Steve followed suit, holding out hands for Kara and Max.

He tried to listen as Jacob said his thanks for the food and whatever else he was being grateful for, but all Steve could think about is why he and Max are in the hot seats. Did Kara and Jacob know something more about the Hargroves that warranted more protection towards Billy? *Steve* . Had their parents shown up here? He knows that people talk--a lot. But would people really point out children who are in danger of their own parents? *Steve* . Did Mr. Hargrove know where Billy and Max were relocated? Did he need to let Claudia know her house was compromised? *Steve* .

"Steve!"

He realized that everyone was staring at him and Max and Kara were trying to remove their hands from his own, “Uh, sorry.”

He was definitely embarrassed, and he could feel it burning on his cheeks.

“This is a big year for you right, graduation’s right around the corner?”

He nodded. He didn’t trust words. Not when he had to explain to Mr. Jacob what he’d said to Kara in the kitchen. He didn’t think he’d be as accepting as his wife.

“Your parents going to be home for the big day? I’m sure, if they couldn’t make it, we and Claudia can always come to cheer you on.”

He was not expecting that at all. He choked down whatever feeling just got caught in his throat and quickly tried to pass it off as a dry cough, gulping down some water.

“I, uh, thank you, that, uh, my, my Uncle John’s been staying with me. Uh, I guess I could tell you, uh, my, my parents are splitting. My mom’s out east at my Uncle John’s with his husband, and uh, my, my dad got an apartment up in Indianapolis. He’s, um, he knocked up his secretary and my mom didn’t take too kindly to that.”

He heard a collective choke from everyone else at the table who’d been eating or drinking as he spoke.

“All the same, we can be there for you if you’ll have us,” Jacob said; “Now, do you have any fun summer plans before real life comes at you in the fall?”

Steve fiddled with his fork, “Yes, uh, the day after graduation I’m uh, Uncle John, Rodney, and my mom, we’re all going back to their place. Mom and I are going to Greece at the end of July, annual family thing. You guys do anything fun for the summer?”

He hated that during that whole spiel Billy just looked down at his food, pushing it around, not really eating any of it.

-X-X-X-X-X-X-

“That wasn’t so bad, are they always going to be like that?” Max asked, turning around from the front to look at Steve in the back seat of the Camaro.

Billy hadn’t said much after he shared he’d gotten a job for the summer with the old man who runs the auto shop just outside of town. He was currently smoking, ignoring, rather dutifully, his car’s occupants.

Steve nodded, “Yeah, I remember the first time I went to a dinner like that, I was such a wreck, and my god, a nerd.”

She made a face, “Do I have to meet the parents every time I date someone?”

He shook his head, “I didn’t always meet the parents, but then again, most parents here already knew who mine were, and the kind of people we were, are, whatever. You’re likable Max, don’t worry about it.”

She grinned and turned around. He watched her look over at Billy like she wanted to say something but thought twice about it.

Steve turned to look out the window, at least he wasn’t being dropped off first.

When the car pulled up to the Henderson house Dustin was already walking down the drive to meet Max. She waved them off, heading back in with Dustin, both of them talking animatedly with their hands. Steve would bet money that Lucas had radioed him and told him all about dinner.

“I, I can walk home if you, you’d rather take a rain check.”

He doesn’t know why he said that. He just knows Billy’s been a little distant since Steve shared that he’d be gone for parts of the summer.

“I’m being stupid,” Billy said, too quiet that Steve wasn’t sure that’s what he heard.

He met the other’s gaze in the rearview mirror and offered a smile.

“Princess, I’m leaving. Uh, I,” Billy cut himself off and threw the car into drive and pulled away from the house.

Steve didn’t say anything.

He didn’t ask him to slow down.

He didn’t tell him to stop.

He just let him drive.

He’d stop when he was ready to talk.

They both have talking to do, with each other.

He wasn’t expecting Billy to take him home. Not yet anyway.

Billy got out and pulled his seat forward so Steve could climb out, giving him plenty of space.

“We, we’re not going to talk about this?” Steve asked, trying and hoping his face wasn’t showing how devastated he was feeling inside.

Steve began to walk away since Billy was determined not to say a word. He took ten steps before he turned around, Billy was half in his seat.

“ No , you, you don’t get to just shut me out, not, not after all the stuff we had to go through to get here, to right now. I, I didn’t, I didn’t take another chance with my heart for you, for you to just throw it back in my face like it was *nothing* !”

Billy reached in and took the keys out of the ignition and got to his feet, closing the door, leaning against his car.

“What do you want me to say, Steve? Huh? That we were going to grow old together? Get a little house on the outskirts of town? I’m not Maxine, I don’t, I don’t have a support system here. Half this town’s already on my old man’s side, that I, I’m a fucked up piece of shit. I won’t thrive here, and I have an out. I talked it over with my guidance counselor, I can take some summer school courses and graduate at the end of summer, and with the money I’ll have earned

working at the shop, I can go home.”

Steve looked at him, really stared him down. He took in his posture, and the way he refused to meet his eyes. He hated the clench of his heart at the realization, “You weren’t going to tell me goodbye, were you?”

He took his ten steps back, putting himself right in front of Billy and he shoved him with all he had, “ *Were you ?*”

He hated that his eyes were stinging--he would never give the other boy the satisfaction of seeing him cry. Not over him.

He shoved at him once more and took a step back, “For being someone who’s so fucking smart, you sure can be the biggest idiot I know. Good luck with your life. See you around, Hargrove.”

He turned around and walked towards his house.

He made it four steps before he felt his tears fall.

He’d made seven before he heard his name being called--it’d never sounded so broken before.

He refused to turn around. This was the goodbye the other one wanted, just a little earlier than planned.

When his hand touched the doorknob to go inside, that’s when he heard the car door open and slam shut.

When he slammed his own front door shut behind him, he heard the car’s engine fade in the distance.

29. Here We Are

He'd been spaced out all day. Very reminiscent of the last time Harrington refused to show up for school. He hated the look on Mrs. Johnston's face when she hand-delivered his final letter of the project to him.

"Dare I say it, Mr. Hargrove, whatever transpired betw--no, pardon me. You both surpassed my expectations with this assignment and your grades will reflect that, *however* , I wouldn't take Mr. Harrington's last words to you lightly. I'll see you this afternoon, and before you ask, *no* , he's not here. His, well, it's not my place."

She turned and walked off, leaving him to hold an envelope that felt suddenly twenty times more heavier than it had any right to feel.

The bell rang and he still stood at his locker, door open, staring down at the envelope in his hand. She didn't even bother to cover up his handwriting--he wrote Hargrove on the outside.

He shook his emotions off and slammed his door shut. Whatever, man, shit happens all the time. It wasn't like they were going steady or anything. Right? They weren't. They'd only kissed--like it gave him the very breath of life--but they were just kisses.

He stomped off towards the library, he wasn't going to deal with classes this morning. He'd hide out until he could sneak out and take a day for himself.

Fucking Harrington. Getting all pissy because Billy wanted to go home, go back to where he was comfortable, where he had friends. Where he could be himself and hold hands with who he wanted to and nobody would throw him on a pyre and torch him.

He stormed in the library, ignoring the indignant then confused stare of Mr. Watkins as he made his way back to the far corner, where an old, plush, chair sat for reading. It was well hidden by shelves and placed just right beside a window where no matter the time of day no shadow disrupted the flow of sunlight.

He knew he was being irrationally angry towards someone he had no right to be angry with--he did this. This was all on him. But when was Steve going to tell him he was taking trips? That he too was leaving?

He tossed his bag on the ground and slumped into the chair and stared at the envelope in his hand. They'd exchanged the barest of answers the last few weeks. Billy knew, he knew, that seniors could cut out early if they were done with all of their exams. He just didn't think Harrin-- Steve , would just leave like that. But what choice did he give him? He'd planned to just leave the same way--Steve just beat him to the punch.

He took a deep breath before he opened the envelope and took out the papers contained within. He took in the scrawled, slanted, messy letters of Steve Harrington.

BILLY,

I'VE HAD THIS LAST LETTER WRITTEN TO YOU SINCE THAT DAY YOU DROVE AWAY FROM ME, THAT NIGHT AFTER DINNER WITH THE SINCLAIR'S.

I HEARD YOU.

I HEARD YOU CALL MY NAME AND YOU SOUNDED SO BROKEN. SO SAD. SO ALONE. LIKE YOU WANTED ME TO TURN AROUND AND TAKE YOU INTO MY ARMS, BUT I DIDN'T.

I COULDN'T.

I STILL CAN'T.

NOT WHEN YOU'D ALREADY PLANNED TO JUST LEAVE TOWN WITHOUT SAYING GOODBYE. THAT MIGHT BE SOMETHING YOU DO OUT WHERE YOU'RE FROM, BUT I WAS RAISED, NO MATTER YOUR FEELINGS TOWARDS SOMEONE, YOU TELL THEM GOODBYE. IT'S A COMMON COURTESY.

I'M WRITING THIS IN MY DAD'S STUDY, WHICH ALSO DOUBLES

AS OUR LIBRARY. I WAS TRYING TO FIND THE RIGHT WORDS TO SAY TO YOU, TO TELL YOU EXACTLY WHAT YOU MEANT TO ME, AND HOW I FEEL.

I REALLY DID WANT TO BE YOUR FRIEND. IT WAS NICE GETTING TO KNOW YOU, THE REAL YOU. I LIKED HIM. A LOT.

YOU REALLY ARE A GIANT NERD, AND I HAD NO IDEA WHAT YOU AND THE PARTY TALKED ABOUT HALF THE TIME, BUT I KNOW THAT I LIKED HOW YOUR FACE, SPECIFICALLY YOUR EYES, WOULD LIGHT UP WHEN YOU TALKED ABOUT SOMETHING YOU LIKED.

I CRIED AS I WALKED AWAY FROM YOU. I WASN'T GOING TO TELL YOU THAT. I WASN'T PLANNING TO AT LEAST, BUT I DID.

I REALLY LIKED GETTING TO KNOW YOU. I THINK, WELL I THOUGHT, YOU LIKED GETTING TO KNOW ME TOO, BUT HERE WE ARE.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT SAYING GOODBYE, OR MY FINAL LETTER. I DON'T WANT IT, EITHER OF THOSE THINGS. NOT FROM YOU.

I FOUND THEM BY THE WAY, THE PERFECT WORDS TO DESCRIBE HOW I FEEL FELT.

AS SOON AS MY DOOR SHUT BEHIND ME I SLID TO THE FLOOR AND I CRIED. I THINK YOU BROKE ME MORE THAN NANCY DID. WHICH MEANS I HAD LOVED YOU AND I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW IT.

“YES, I WAS INFATUATED WITH YOU: I STILL AM. NO ONE HAS EVER HEIGHTENED SUCH A KEEN CAPACITY OF PHYSICAL SENSATION IN ME. I CUT YOU OUT BECAUSE COULDN'T STAND BEING A PASSING FANCY. BEFORE I GIVE MY BODY, I MUST GIVE MY THOUGHTS, MY MIND, MY DREAMS. AND YOU WEREN'T HAVING ANY OF THOSE.”

-s.p.

I WON'T BE AT THE TRIAL. I HOPE YOU DIDN'T LOOK FOR ME. BUT I KNEW THE PEOPLE I CARE ABOUT, YOU WERE IN GOOD HANDS. YOUR PARENTS NEVER STOOD A CHANCE. NOT AGAINST HOP, CLAUDIA, AND THE SINCLAIR'S.

I HOPE YOU FIND WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR OUT IN CALIFORNIA.

Billy feels gutted. He'd felt his heart clench from the second he read his name, and then, to, to get to that Sylvia Plath quote, no, he'd felt gutted the moment he read the words-- *I had loved you and didn't even know it.*

He had goals dammit, he wasn't going to throw them away because he was acting like a stupid girl with a broken heart. He wasn't. He glanced around, glad to still be alone in his little corner of the world. He could feel his face flushed with his emotions. He knew that if he blinked, the tears would come.

I SPENT ALL THE NEXT DAY FEELING LIKE A STUPID GIRL NURSING AN UNREQUITED CRUSH. BUT THE REALITY WAS SO MUCH WORSE THAN THAT. MY FEELINGS WEREN'T UNREQUITED--YOU FELT IT TOO.

THE THING THAT I KEPT FROM YOU, THE THING THAT MAX AND THE OTHERS KEEP FROM YOU, WE SIGNED GOVERNMENT-ISSUED NON-DISCLOSURE FORMS, WE CANNOT TELL YOU ANYTHING. BUT I DON'T CARE ANYMORE. I WANT YOU TO KNOW WHY I'M NOT KING STEVE ANYMORE.

THE LAB, YEAH, THAT CREEPY FUCKING PLACE OUT IN THE WOODS, IS A PORTAL TO ANOTHER DIMENSION WITH MONSTERS THAT MAKE YOUR OLD MAN'S TEMPER LOOK LIKE THE HOLY MOTHER IN COMPARISON.

NANCY'S FRIEND, BARB, THAT GIRL, SHE DIED FROM A MONSTER THAT SMELLED HER BLOOD THROUGH MY POOL, WHICH APPARENTLY WAS ANOTHER PORTAL. HER BODY IS IN THE UPSIDE DOWN. I WANT TO BRING IT BACK SO HER PARENTS HAVE SOMETHING, NOT JUST AN EMPTY CASKET. GIVE THEM CLOSURE INSTEAD OF THE FALSE HOPE THAT AN EMPTY CASKET MEANS SHE MIGHT STILL BE ALIVE. SHE'S NOT. SHE DIED BECAUSE SHE WASN'T GOING TO ABANDON HER BEST FRIEND. HER BEST FRIEND WHO BLEW HER OFF TO FUCK ME. SHE DIED BEING THE BEST KIND OF FRIEND ANYONE SHOULD EVER WANT TO HAVE--HAD NANCY'S BACK NO MATTER WHAT SHITTY CHOICES SHE MADE.

ONE OF THOSE SAME MONSTERS CAME THROUGH THE BYERS HOUSE AND JON AND I TORCHED IT. THAT'S WHERE MY NAIL-BAT COMES FROM.

THINGS WERE CONTAINED.

UNTIL THEY WEREN'T.

YOU ROLLED INTO TOWN, TOOK MY CROWN, AND I WAS GLAD FOR IT. WHEN YOU ALMOST DIE FROM MONSTERS FROM OTHER DIMENSIONS, IT PUTS LIFE INTO PERSPECTIVE. HIGH SCHOOL WAS BULLSHIT.

DID YOU LOOK IN THE FRIDGE WHEN YOU WOKE UP? DID YOU

LOOK AT THE DEMO-DOG WE KILLED? HONESTLY, WITH HOW MANY WERE OUTSIDE, WE WERE SURPRISED YOU DIDN'T HIT ONE, OR ENCOUNTER ONE ON YOUR WAY TO THE HOUSE.

I WELCOMED DEATH AT YOUR HANDS THAT NIGHT. I DON'T REMEMBER IF I EVER TOLD YOU THAT. JANE HAD GONE, RUN AWAY, OUR ONE SHOT AT KEEPING THINGS AT BAY, AND WILL, POOR KID, COULDN'T CATCH A BREAK, BEING POSSESSED BY THE FUCKING MINDFLAYER.

WHEN I CAME TO IN THE BACKSEAT OF YOUR CAR, MAX BEHIND THE WHEEL, I THOUGHT OKAY, THIS IS TERRIFYING, AND THIS IS HOW I'M ACTUALLY GOING TO DIE, BUT WE MADE IT TO THE FARM, TO THE TUNNELS THAT RAN UNDERGROUND. THOSE DRAWINGS YOU GOT WEIRDED OUT BY, WAS A MAP.

I DIDN'T THINK JANE WAS GOING TO BE ABLE TO FIGHT OFF THE MINDFLAYER. I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO DIE PROTECTING THOSE STUPID KIDS BECAUSE THEY WOULDN'T LEAVE WELL ENOUGH ALONE. BUT WE DID IT. WE CAUSED ENOUGH OF A DISTRACTION TORCHING THEIR MAIN HUB THAT JANE HAD ENOUGH TIME TO DO IT--TO CLOSE THE PORTAL.

I KNOW THIS ALL SOUNDS CRAZY AND YOU DON'T REALLY HAVE TO BELIEVE ME, BUT ASK MAX. SHE'LL TELL YOU. JUST SAY DEMO-DOG.

SHE'LL TELL YOU EVERYTHING. I ALREADY TOLD HER I WAS LEAKING THIS TO YOU.

That house gave him the heebie-jeebies, he didn't explore anything once he came to. He walked home. If there really were monsters running around he was lucky he wasn't eaten.

I ALSO FOUND MORE. MORE WORDS TO HELP YOU FIGURE OUT WHAT YOU MEANT TO ME. BUT YOU'RE NOT GOING TO GET THEM.

I THINK, HAD YOU ACTUALLY TALKED WITH ME, AND WE HAD AN ACTUAL CONVERSATION LIKE THE YOUNG ADULTS WE WANT TO BE, WE'D REALIZE JUST HOW FAR WE COULD'VE GONE.

I NEVER WOULD'VE ASKED YOU TO STAY IN HAWKINS. I KNOW YOUR PASSION WOULD FIZZLE OUT AND DIE. YOU WOULD SUFFOCATE SPENDING THE REST OF YOUR LIFE IN THIS TOWN.

I'D HAVE FOLLOWED YOU TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.

I'VE LEARNED THAT I'M AN ALL OR NOTHING KIND OF GUY. BUT YOU'RE ALSO DIFFERENT.

YOU DESERVE HAPPINESS BILLY HARGROVE.

YOU DESERVE LOVE. ALL KINDS.

I WON'T BE AT SCHOOL ON THE LAST DAY OF THESE LETTERS. I'M CUTTING YOU OUT, REMEMBER?

I'LL HAVE FINISHED ALL MY EXAMS EARLY, AS REQUESTED, AND I'LL BE GONE. I'LL BE OUT EAST, AN ENTIRE COUNTRY AWAY FROM YOU WHEN YOU MAKE IT BACK TO CALIFORNIA.

I BET YOU LOOK STUNNING ON A BEACH, IN THE SUN. YOU PROBABLY GLOW. YOU WERE EVERY BIT AS PRETTY AS YOU CLAIMED ME TO BE. PROBABLY MORE SO THAN ME.

ONE OF THE KIDS HAS MY UNCLE'S ADDRESS. IN CASE YOU EVER WANT TO WRITE AND YOU FIGURE OUT WHICH ONE I GAVE IT TO.

IF NOT, NO FOUL.

I REMEMBER THE MOMENT I FIGURED OUT IT WAS YOU. I REMEMBER HAVING SUCH A VIOLENT REACTION--THAT'S THE DAY YOU WERE OUT ON THE TRACK. WHAT WERE YOU RUNNING FROM? I THINK THAT'S THE QUESTION THAT'S GOING TO BOTHER ME THE MOST. IN ALL OF OUR LETTERS, AND ALL OF OUR CONVERSATIONS, YOU NEVER TOLD ME WHY YOU WERE OUT THERE RUNNING THAT DAY.

I ALWAYS RAN FROM THE MONSTERS. I THINK YOU WERE TOO--JUST YOURS WERE HUMAN.

KARMA IS A BITCH. HAPPY BIRTHDAY. THAT'S THE DAY YOU'LL BE GETTING THIS LETTER.

YOURS, STEVE

"There you are," Billy startled at the voice in front of him. He looked up at Nancy Wheeler.

"He's not here," he said to her.

"I know. He actually said goodbye to his *friends* . I just came to wish you a happy birthday, and to let you know that the kids are putting something together for you so you'd better show up and you'd better act surprised."

"Why did you break up with him?"

He watched her freeze a moment before looking at him, judging him, weighing him it seemed. She sat down, back against the bookshelf in front of him.

"He's told you about the Upside Down. And Ba, Barb. I was stupid and naive, she saw through him, but I was enamored by King Steve giving me the time of day. We tried to make it work after the first experience with the monsters, but I'd already experienced more with Jonathan at that point.

"Shared trauma or whatever. Steve is so much more than his pretty face and stupid rich family. His heart will forever be too big for him. You're lucky to have been loved by him. I'm lucky to have been loved by him. I was holding him back, plus I was already moving on to Jonathan, and he hadn't really been in as deep as we had, but he came back that night at the Byers.

"He was trying to apologize for being an asshole and I kept pushing him away, but I still couldn't end things, not, not until I'd gotten completely shitfaced at that Halloween party you were at. I, I broke up with him in the bathroom upstairs. It was, I."

“Bullshit. That’s what you called him.”

“He and I have made our peace. He never looked at me the way he looked at you. You really were different for him. I think you were everything he didn’t know he needed. I know you’re everything I never could be for him.”

“You don’t have the address do you?”

She smirked, “Nope, I’m not one of the kids. Plus he didn’t tell me which one he told. Seriously though,” she said getting to her feet, “Max is going to ask you to take her to the diner, do it. And be surprised.”

He let her go. Was he really already gone though? If he left now, would someone still be at the Harrington residence? He gathered up his things and exited the school building. He had some wrongs he had to make right.

30. While I Was There

It's been a *month* since he last laid eyes on Steve. *Weeks* since the boy left Hawkins, and he still has no idea which of the little heathens has the address.

He has a letter. He too wrote one on his return to Claudia's house that evening. He'd locked himself in the room and refused dinner. The only company he welcomed that evening was Tews. Stubborn cat latched itself to him and he had no idea why.

He'd torn it up the evening after the trial.

He *had* looked for Steve.

He didn't have anyone but himself to blame for his absence.

The only good thing about that day was that Neil and Susan Hargrove, and Max's dad, were deemed unfit parents and they would remain wards of the state under Claudia Henderson's care.

He knows the kids called and talked to Steve on the phone; Max had even asked if Billy'd like to say hello.

He couldn't.

What would he say?

Sorry ?

I miss you ?

I think I loved you too ?

What good would any of it do?

So he'd waved her off and shut the door in her face and let them all celebrate. It was all for her anyway.

He'd found a passage in one of the many books Old Man Jones had stashed around the shop, something called *Dangerous Liaisons*. *"Now, I'm not going to deny that I was aware of your beauty. But the point is, this has nothing to do with your beauty. As I got to know you, I began to realize that beauty was the least of your qualities. I became fascinated by your goodness. I was drawn in by it. I didn't understand what was happening to me. And it was only when I began to feel actual, physical pain every time you left the room that it finally dawned on me: I was in love, for the first time in my life. I knew it was hopeless, but that didn't matter to me. And it's not that I want to have you. All I want is to deserve you. Tell me what to do. Show me how to behave. I'll do anything you say."*

He hates how the first time he's ever loved someone it's turned to shit. He would though, do anything Steve asked him to. He wants to be the kind of person Steve deserves, but Harrington comes from a whole different world of people than Billy. Billy grew up middle-class, but with the lifestyle Steve's accustomed to, he might as well grown up dirt poor.

He knows that's a cowardly notion to hide behind, that he's no good for Steve. That he'll *never* be good enough for him.

But he won't.

He might be an idiot but he's not stupid.

Steve's too good for him. He'd only destroy him.

His bedroom door opened and in came Jane--he could've sworn he locked it. She smiled as she sat down at the foot of his bed.

"Hello, William."

"Hi, Jane."

"You're hiding and it's unbe-unco-unbecoming of you. He doesn't hate you, no matter what he's said."

He looked at her and he realized for the first time that she *was* staring into his soul, reading his goddamn mind.

"*You* , you have the address."

She grinned, "He knew I'd figure it out. The others asked for permission, but I got tired of waiting for you to come and ask me for it. Friends don't lie, but I'm done being sad watching the two of you be sad over each other. Love is love and you two are being stupid. You didn't even try to compromise."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper, or rather a scrap torn from a sheet of notebook paper.

He hastily unfolded it and read the address written in her

handwriting--she's been practicing, getting better.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

She shook her head, “He convinced his mom to come home for the fourth of July. That is where you'll find him.”

She gave him one last look, almost like she wishes she could control him to move his body and go to Steve's right this second. Then got to her feet and left him alone, not bothering to close the door behind her.

He stood up, then sat back down. His chest got tight and he had to take a few deep breaths to bring himself back to the moment.

Steve was home--he was *here* .

Would he want to see him though?

He got to his feet and left his room, for the first time not to eat or go to work. He walked out into the living room where the kids were set up, Claudia was outside working on her garden--he could hear her singing coming through one of the windows.

“It's alive!”

He flipped Henderson off but smiled anyway.

Max looked up from where she was sitting between Sinclair and Wheeler junior, dice in hand, "He asked about you, just so you know."

"My mom is out to lunch with his mom and Mrs. Wheeler, if, if you wanted to go by; he's there alone."

Billy looked the small Byers right in the eye--kid looked like he dared Billy to say something.

"Why," he started, "Why do you guys keep pushing us together? You know we can't, we'd never be," he took a deep breath.

"Normal?" Wheeler junior blurted out, "Newsflash mouthbreather, none of us here are normal. And besides, if we hated on you and Steve and your gross love story, we'd have to hate Will too, and frankly, we don't have it in us to hate someone just because of who they like."

Billy glanced from Wheeler to Byers, the latter was getting pink in the face. Good for that kid for telling his friends. And good for his friends for not turning on him.

"So you guys want to see more of me and Steve together? You'd be fine if I crashed your movie nights, putting my arms around him, kissing him in front of you?"

“Love is love, William. Now go, or you’re going to play with us. You will be my barbarian, or you can go get Steve back.”

Billy didn’t like the amused glances they shared when Jane called him a barbarian, but he also knew better than to ask her to clarify. His base knowledge of the game, each of their characters were a reflection of themselves, and if he was the barbarian, he knew it was a catch-22.

“Oh my god, just go already!”

He nodded and turned to gather his things from his dresser, wallet, and keys.

He looped around through the kitchen as to not disturb them, or to deal with any more of their comments on the matter.

He heard Claudia shout something, but saw her head pop up then froze in shock at who she was pulling into a hug--Steve was here. He was right outside.

“Steve! You should’ve called! Do the kids know you’re here? Oh, they’ll be so happy to see you!”

He couldn’t make out what the other boy was saying but he saw both of them turn to the house and he ducked down, hoping that neither

of them saw him. He quickly darted back to his room but the door wouldn't budge.

He knew he didn't lock himself out.

He turned around and pressed his back against the door when he heard Claudia enter the house and exclaim that Steve was here, that he'd come for a visit.

He tried to breathe as he heard the commotion of the kids welcoming Steve. Greeting him and asking him about his trip to his uncle's house.

He tried the door one more time and it wouldn't budge. He steeled himself and headed out towards the commotion.

"What's all this ruckus, oh, hey Harrington, welcome back to town."

He hated how fake his own voice sounded. He hated the looks the kids gave each other, and then between him and Steve.

"Hey Billy, how's your summer been?" Steve asked, not quite meeting Billy's eyes. It was as if he was looking over Billy's shoulder to give the impression of looking at him.

Billy shrugged, "Was just about to head out, if you'd like to catch up, we could go for a drive, unless you want to stay with your children,

I'd understand."

He would never tell a single soul that his heart hammered so hard in his chest those few seconds it took Steve to agree to go for a ride. He'd almost thought the other boy said no, but then Henderson was yelling out it's not fair, you just got home, and El was giving him a look that said shut up, let them be in love.

She seriously gives him the heebie-jeebies. He's pretty sure that she has superpowers but nobody will confirm or deny his theory.

"A drive sounds nice. Claudia, we could bring some pizzas back in a little bit, if that's alright with you?"

"Oh sweetie, that's very thoughtful of you! I'll ring up their mothers and let them know that my place is the hub tonight. Be safe you two! Dusty and Max, I'll be right outside if you guys need anything."

Billy followed Claudia out the front door, watching as she busied herself with the garden under the window. It really was coming along nicely.

A hand on his shoulder startled him, "You ready?"

He looked at Steve's hand and then his face, knowing that everything he was currently feeling, the other boy could see written clearly on his face. Steve quickly took his hand back and mumbled a sorry.

Billy walked stiffly to his car and climbed in, reaching across to unlock the passenger door. He didn't wait for Steve to buckle up before he was zooming out of the driveway.

He'd forgotten the last time he was in the car, he and the junior nerds were discussing *The Goonies*, so the radio was off. He'd promised to take them all to go see *Back to the Future*. It was all they could talk about.

This silence between them was suffocating. It was full of so much tension, and not the good kind. Not the kind that would end up with them sweaty, moaning, and in the back seat of his car.

"Billy, I," Steve started and then stopped.

He had no idea where he was driving, he was taking turns a little to fast, definitely not obeying speed limit posts. But goddammit, Steve still looked good riding shotgun.

"Spit it out man, if there's anything left to say. 'Cause your letter did a pretty damn good job of telling me all I needed to know."

He could do this, talk with this cold, cruel tone.

"Why did you want to talk to me on the phone, on the day of the trial?"

He barked out a laugh; “You serious right now? *That* ’s what you want to talk to me about? The goddamn trial?”

“Would you rather I bring up feelings? ‘Cause last time that happened you promptly told me to fuck off. Why are you still here and not back in California? You turned 18 a while ago.”

Billy slammed on the brakes, stopping in the middle of the road, “I was going to tell you goodbye. It wasn’t anyone else’s position to tell you what my life plans were, but they beat me to the punch. I just, I just didn’t know *how* to tell you that I couldn’t stay here. But then, then you just disappeared. *You* left without a goodbye. Nothing. You leave me with an *I loved you and I didn’t even know it* .”

He took a deep breath, kept his gaze in front of him, grip tight on the steering wheel.

“I never asked any of them for the address, just so you know. I didn’t want to go through each of them and have them look at me with pity. They got tired of me moping around though because Janie confronted me earlier today. You, you, you told me you *love me*, sit on it for weeks, knowing you’d be long gone by the time those words would actually get to me, and now, *now* you just think you can waltz back into my life?

“But fine, to appease you, it fucking sucked okay. I looked for you. I looked through every face that sat in that audience looking for the only one that would give me any solace, but you’d already been long gone. It was shitty to have photos of my body on display, bruises, two of which were noticeable boot prints, the same fucking ones the old man had the audacity to wear that day.

“The lawyer for him and Susan pulled all my records from California to use against me, but Jesus, your people really pulled through. Max, God, she’s braver and stronger than I ever hope to be. She stood her ground, stared my old man down as she recounted everything from that night. And the few I never knew she’d witnessed. Told the judge that my record was due to my mom’s sudden death.

“I, I had no idea that the team Mr. Sin--Jacob, put together allowed witnesses. I was right though, about Max having a great support system here, I just, I never, I didn’t think it’d applied to me too. Claudia vouched for me like she birthed me herself. How helpful around the house I was, how I’d already fixed up her car for her because I’d noticed it was making a funny sound.

“Mrs. Johnson was there too. Said that I had one of the brightest minds she’d had the pleasure of teaching. Told everyone in that room that I was stuck in the anger stage of grief and that I’d been told to not show emotions because I’m a teenage boy. She made all the men in that room sit up a little straighter, stiffen their shoulders, and display shame on all of their faces. Asked them how they felt they could condemn me for defending my sister when I’ve been told all my life that how I feel is invalid. How could they want to keep two children who are constantly verbally and physically abused in a home with people who are supposed to love and nurture them?”

He’d known he was crying. He was never going to recount that day and not cry about it. It was an emotional day.

“At that point, the old man’s lawyer tried to interject with the whole *faggot* thing, when Mrs. Johnson cut the judge off herself, stood up and looked that man in the face, *How dare you belittle this young man because of who he loves! How dare you try and use that as a means to keep him in a house where his own father tries to beat it out of him as if*

that's the best option for him!

"She, she gestured to the photos on display, she gestured to the photo of Max's face. Their lawyer tried to call some stupid term to get her to shut up, but the judge had heard everything and took it into consideration. The judge dismissed us, but not even ten minutes later he'd called everyone back into session. My record prevented Neil getting jail time, however, they were both put on probation for the endangerment of their own children. They have to do meetings and check-ins with a bunch of people to make sure that they're trying to become better people.

"Max never has to go back though. The judge had dismissed everyone but himself and us two. He asked us what we really thought and felt about the situation, and we told him the truth. I think, I think that's the first time she and I were honest with an authority figure about our home life. She told him that she'd found her new family and would like nothing more than to stay with them. And because I still have one year of school left, despite being 18, I, if I choose to, I can stick around and Neil can't do a damn thing about it.

"I'd still be protected. So I told them that night after everyone else had gone home, and it was just Claudia, Henderson, Max, and me, that I'd stick around for my senior year. I wouldn't rush off to California, it'll still be there when I graduate next summer. I uh, I get to be me for the first time in a long time."

He let out a long, shaky breath as if he'd been holding it all in this whole time. He probably was.

He chanced a look at Steve, who'd been looking at him the whole time-- *I know what your gaze feels like when it's on me* . He wiped at his eyes and cheeks, but couldn't bring himself to smile.

He met Steve's gaze, and those beautiful, big, brown eyes were so expressive. He watched as those brown eyes moved over every inch of his own face, and then as they lingered on his lips.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here for you when you needed me the most. I, I chose to run because it was easier than facing my shit. I," his voice got soft and his eyes met with Billy's again, "I need, you're different Billy. You've always been different to me, for me. When Max told me that you, you didn't want to talk to me, that night, of the trial, I, I ran from my uncle's and headed to the large hotel. I, I met someo--"

"Are you serious right now?"

"Just hear me out, please?"

Billy nodded.

"Her name was Sam, and she'd grown up in the fifties. Two of her friends were in jail, one killed herself, and the other was taken to an asylum after that, after the suicide. Uh, she told me that she had a husband, they uh, were the same. They covered up for each other's indiscretions. Often going out on double dates with each other's partner as to keep the peace.

"She poured me a glass of chocolate milk and told me to follow her. She led me to a small booth where she gestured for me to sit down. She asked me about you. Asked me who broke my heart like that, and I got mad at her. I said it was me, my own fault. You, you'd done nothing wrong. And, and so, I, I told her about everything. The first time you ever interacted with me at Tina's party, to basketball

practice, to, to that night at the Byers', and the letters.

“That, that I’d left you thinking I hated you and it was all your fault, when, when it was mine. She looked at me and then asked me about all the people I’ve ever loved. When, I, I couldn’t really tell her anything, not, not even Nancy. She said your name and I smiled. She said ‘ *You might not have been my first love, but you were the love that made all the other loves irrelevant!* ’

“And you are! Like, I, I finally told my mom about you. The truth. I uh, told the kids that I convinced her to bring me home, but she uh, she made me come back. For you. To you. She said I was an idiot and that she’d never brought me to Uncle John and Rodney’s before because she wanted to bring me when I could share it with someone who deserves that part of me.

“All I thought about was you while I was there. We even went to New York City for a few days and I could only think of all the places you’d love to see and visit. What you’d have loved to try, and what you’d have hated to have to eat. I just, I want, will you let me make it up to you? Even if it takes the rest of our lives? ‘Cause I’m pretty sure that you’re who I want to grow up and old with. I, I know it’s going to be hard because we’re both stubborn assholes, and, I, I ju--”

“Yes.”

Steve’s eyes widened and he stared at Billy.

Steve opened his mouth to say something but Billy cut him off, “We’re agreed that we’re both sorry and stupid and have been the

biggest idiots, yes?”

Steve nodded.

Billy smiled.

“Billy, I, can I, we, can I kiss you?”

Billy nodded.

They met each other over the console, hands reaching out to touch, to ground each other, to reassure that this was real and it was happening. Their teeth clashed, lips dancing, as they tried to put everything, the last month, their letters, *everything*, into this moment. Fingers and hands roamed to wherever they could touch, tangle in hair, brush against skin, push shirt collars out of the way just to feel each other.

Bright lights and a horn honking broke them apart and they started laughing. Billy put up his middle finger at the car behind them, and then immediately regretted it when red and blue lights started to flash.

They only had eyes for each other, so neither noticed the familiar face get out of the car behind them. They didn't pull apart until there was a knock on Billy's window and flashlight in Steve's face.

“Hello boys, you know there are places besides the middle of the road

to go parking, right?”

“Come on Hop, the moment struck and nobody’s passed by for a while.”

Jim smirked, “That why Flo radioed to let me know a few people called about a stalled or parked blue car in the middle of the road? Welcome home Steve, but come on guys, move along and take it somewhere nobody can rear-end you. And let Jane know that Joyce will be by around 8:30 to pick her and Will up.”

He patted the top of the car and returned to his truck, pulling around Billy’s car before the boys could settle back in their own seats.

Steve smiled, reached out and turned on Billy’s radio. Billy turned on his headlights and put the car into drive and pulled off. He put his right arm down on the console, palm up. It only took a few seconds before Steve’s hand was in his, fingers linking together. He knew in three turns to make a left and they’d loop back around towards the main strip in town where they could grab some pizzas as they promised.

But for now, he’d enjoy the ride.

As he made the left turn, Steve squeezed his hand three times. *I love you.*

Notes for the Chapter:

THE END.

...for now.

While writing this, I had so many little side blips pop up that I'm most likely going to create a series of attached one-shots....however, my laptop screen crapped out on me so I'm pricing out fixing it or buying a new one. It was only \$200 the first time, so if I have to pay \$170 to fix it, I'm just going to pay the extra \$30 for a new one.

There are not enough words to express my gratitude for all of you and your adoration of this fic. It was such a fun ride and thanks for taking it with me.